

COLLECTED ESSAYS

By
Virginia Woolf

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On not Knowing Greek

FOR it is vain and foolish to talk of knowing Greek, since in our ignorance we should be at the bottom of any class of schoolboys, since we do not know how the words sounded, or where precisely we ought to laugh, or how the actors acted, and between this foreign people and ourselves there is not only difference of race and tongue but a tremendous breach of tradition. All the more strange, then, is it that we should wish to know Greek, try to know Greek, feel for ever drawn back to Greek, and be for ever making up some notion of the meaning of Greek, though from what incongruous odds and ends, with what slight resemblance to the real meaning of Greek, who shall say?

It is obvious in the first place that Greek literature is the impersonal literature. Those few hundred years that separate John Paston from Plato, Norwich from Athens, make a chasm which the vast tide of European chatter can never succeed in crossing. When we read Chaucer, we are floated up to him insensibly on the current of our ancestors' lives, and later, as records increase and memories lengthen, there is scarcely a figure which has not its nimbus of association, its life and letters, its wife and family, its house, its character, its happy or dismal catastrophe. But the Greeks remain in a fastness of their own. Fate has been kind there too. She has preserved them from vulgarity. Euripides was eaten by dogs; Aeschylus killed by a stone; Sappho leapt from a cliff. We know no more of them than that. We have their poetry, and that is all.

But that is not, and perhaps never can be, wholly true. Pick up any play by Sophocles, read—

Son of him who led our hosts at Troy of old, son of Agamemnon, and at once the mind begins to fashion itself surroundings. It makes some background, even of the most provisional sort, for Sophocles; it imagines some village, in a remote part of the country, near the sea. Even nowadays such villages are to be found in the wilder parts of England, and as we enter them we can scarcely help feeling that here, in this cluster of cottages, cut off from rail or city, are all

the elements of a perfect existence. Here is the Rectory; here the Manor house, the farm and the cottages; the church for worship, the club for meeting, the cricket field for play. Here life is simply sorted out into its main elements. Each man and woman has his work; each works for the health or happiness of others. And here, in this little community, characters become part of the common stock; the eccentricities of the clergyman are known; the great ladies' defects of temper; the blacksmith's feud with the milkman, and the loves and matings of the boys and girls. Here life has cut the same grooves for centuries; customs have arisen; legends have attached themselves to hilltops and solitary trees, and the village has its history, its festivals, and its rivalries.

It is the climate that is impossible. If we try to think of Sophocles here, we must annihilate the smoke and the damp and the thick wet mists. We must sharpen the lines of the hills. We must imagine a beauty of stone and earth rather than of woods and greenery. With warmth and sunshine and months of brilliant, fine weather, life of course is instantly changed; it is transacted out of doors, with the result, known to all who visit Italy, that small incidents are debated in the street, not in the sitting-room, and become dramatic; make people voluble; inspire in them that sneering, laughing, nimbleness of wit and tongue peculiar to the Southern races, which has nothing in common with the slow reserve, the low half-tones, the brooding introspective melancholy of people accustomed to live more than half the year indoors.

That is the quality that first strikes us in Greek literature, the lightning-quick, sneering, out-of-doors manner. It is apparent in the most august as well as in the most trivial places. Queens and Princesses in this very tragedy by Sophocles stand at the door bandying words like village women, with a tendency, as one might expect, to rejoice in language, to split phrases into slices, to be intent on verbal victory. The humour of the people was not good-natured like that of our postmen and cab-drivers. The taunts of men lounging at the street corners had something cruel in them as well as witty. There is a cruelty in Greek tragedy which is quite unlike our English brutality. Is not Pentheus, for example, that highly respectable man, made ridiculous in the *Bacchæ* before he is destroyed? In fact, of course, these Queens and Princesses were out of doors, with the bees buzzing past them, shadows crossing

them, and the wind taking their draperies. They were speaking to an enormous audience rayed round them on one of those brilliant southern days when the sun is so hot and yet the air so exciting. The poet, therefore, had to bethink him, not of some theme which could be read for hours by people in privacy, but of something emphatic, familiar, brief, that would carry, instantly and directly, to an audience of seventeen thousand people perhaps, with ears and eyes eager and attentive, with bodies whose muscles would grow stiff if they sat too long without diversion. Music and dancing he would need, and naturally would choose one of those legends, like our Tristram and Iseult, which are known to everyone in outline, so that a great fund of emotion is ready prepared, but can be stressed in a new place by each new poet.

Sophocles would take the old story of Electra, for instance, but would at once impose his stamp upon it. Of that, in spite of our weakness and distortion, what remains visible to us? That his genius was of the extreme kind in the first place; that he chose a design which, if it failed, would show its failure in gashes and ruin, not in the gentle blurring of some insignificant detail; which, if it succeeded, would cut each stroke to the bone, would stamp each fingerprint in marble. His Electra stands before us like a figure so tightly bound that she can only move an inch this way, an inch that. But each movement must tell to the utmost, or, bound as she is, denied the relief of all hints, repetitions, suggestions, she will be nothing but a dummy, tightly bound. Her words in crisis are, as a matter of fact, bare; mere cries of despair, joy, hate

οἷ γὰρ τάλαιν', ὅλωλα τῇδ' ἐν ἡμέρᾳ.
παῖσον, εἰ σθένεις, διπλῆν.

But these cries give angle and outline to the play. It is thus, with a thousand differences of degree, that in English literature Jane Austen shapes a novel. There comes a moment — 'I will dance with you,' says Emma — which rises higher than the rest, which, though not eloquent in itself, or violent, or made striking by beauty of language, has the whole weight of the book behind it. In Jane Austen, too, we have the same sense, though the ligatures are much less tight, that her figures are bound, and restricted to a few definite movements. She, too, in her modest, everyday prose, chose the dangerous art where one slip means death.

But it is not so easy to decide what it is that gives these cries of Electra in her anguish their power to cut and wound and excite. It is partly that we know her, that we have picked up from little turns and twists of the dialogue hints of her character, of her appearance, which, characteristically, she neglected; of something suffering in her, outraged and stimulated to its utmost stretch of capacity, yet, as she herself knows ('my behaviour is unseemly and becomes me ill'), blunted and debased by the horror of her position, an unwed girl made to witness her mother's vileness and denounce it in loud, almost vulgar, clamour to the world at large. It is partly, too, that we know in the same way that Clytemnestra is no unmitigated villainess. 'δεινὸν τὸ τίκτειν ἐστίν,' she says—'there is a strange power in motherhood'. It is no murderess, violent and unredeemed, whom Orestes kills within the house, and Electra bids him utterly destroy—'Strike again.' No; the men and women standing out in the sunlight before the audience on the hillside were alive enough, subtle enough, not mere figures, or plaster casts of human beings.

Yet it is not because we can analyse them into feelings that they impress us. In six pages of Proust we can find more complicated and varied emotions than in the whole of the *Electra*. But in the *Electra* or in the *Antigone* we are impressed by something different, by something perhaps more impressive—by heroism itself, by fidelity itself. In spite of the labour and the difficulty it is this that draws us back and back to the Greeks; the stable, the permanent, the original human being is to be found there. Violent emotions are needed to rouse him into action, but when thus stirred by death, by betrayal, by some other primitive calamity, Antigone and Ajax and Electra behave in the way in which we should behave thus struck down; the way in which everybody has always behaved; and thus we understand them more easily and more directly than we understand the characters in the *Canterbury Tales*. These are the originals, Chaucer's the varieties of the human species.

It is true, of course, that these types of the original man or woman, these heroic Kings, these faithful daughters, these tragic Queens who stalk through the ages always planting their feet in the same places, twitching their robes with the same gestures, from habit not from impulse, are among the greatest bores and the most demoralizing companions in the world. The plays of Addison,

Voltaire, and a host of others are there to prove it. But encounter them in Greek. Even in Sophocles, whose reputation for restraint and mastery has filtered down to us from the scholars, they are decided, ruthless, direct. A fragment of their speech broken off would, we feel, colour oceans and oceans of the respectable drama. Here we meet them before their emotions have been worn into uniformity. Here we listen to the nightingale whose song echoes through English literature singing in her own Greek tongue. For the first time Orpheus with his lute makes men and beasts follow him. Their voices ring out clear and sharp; we see the hairy, tawny bodies at play in the sunlight among the olive trees, not posed gracefully on granite plinths in the pale corridors of the British Museum. And then suddenly, in the midst of all this sharpness and compression, Electra, as if she swept her veil over her face and forbade us to think of her any more, speaks of that very nightingale: 'that bird distraught with grief, the messenger of Zeus. Ah, queen of sorrow, Niobe, thee I deem divine---thee; who evermore weepst in thy rocky tomb.'

And as she silences her own complaint, she perplexes us again with the insoluble question of poetry and its nature, and why, as she speaks thus, her words put on the assurance of immortality. For they are Greek; we cannot tell how they sounded; they ignore the obvious sources of excitement; they owe nothing of their effect to any extravagance of expression, and certainly they throw no light upon the speaker's character or the writer's. But they remain, something that has been stated and must eternally endure.

Yet in a play how dangerous this poetry, this lapse from the particular to the general must of necessity be, with the actors standing there in person, with their bodies and their faces passively waiting to be made use of! For this reason the later plays of Shakespeare, where there is more of poetry than of action, are better read than seen, better understood by leaving out the actual body than by having the body, with all its associations and movements, visible to the eye. The intolerable restrictions of the drama could be loosened, however, if a means could be found by which what was general and poetic, comment, not action, could be freed without interrupting the movement of the whole. It is this that the choruses supply; the old men or women who take no active part in the drama, the undifferentiated voices who sing like birds in the

pauses of the wind; who can comment, or sum up, or allow the poet to speak himself or supply, by contrast, another side to his conception. Always in imaginative literature, where characters speak for themselves and the author has no part, the need of that voice is making itself felt. For though Shakespeare (unless we consider that his fools and madmen supply the part) dispensed with the chorus, novelists are always devising some substitute—Thackeray speaking in his own person, Fielding coming out and addressing the world before his curtain rises. So to grasp the meaning of the play the chorus is of the utmost importance. One must be able to pass easily into those ecstasies, those wild and apparently irrelevant utterances, those sometimes obvious and commonplace statements, to decide their relevance or irrelevance, and give them their relation to the play as a whole.

We must 'be able to pass easily'; but that of course is exactly what we cannot do. For the most part the choruses, with all their obscurities, must be spelt out and their symmetry mauled. But we can guess that Sophocles used them not to express something outside the action of the play, but to sing the praises of some virtue, or the beauties of some place mentioned in it. He selects what he wishes to emphasize and sings of white Colonus and its nightingale, or of love unconquered in fight. Lovely, lofty, and serene, his choruses grow naturally out of his situations, and change, not the point of view, but the mood. In Euripides, however, the situations are not contained within themselves; they give off an atmosphere of doubt, of suggestion, of questioning; but if we look to the choruses to make this plain we are often baffled rather than instructed. At once in the *Bacchae* we are in the world of psychology and doubt; the world where the mind twists facts and changes them and makes the familiar aspects of life appear new and questionable. What is Bacchus, and who are the Gods, and what is man's duty to them, and what the rights of his subtle brain? To these questions the chorus makes no reply, or replies mockingly, or speaks darkly as if the straitness of the dramatic form had tempted Euripides to violate it, in order to relieve his mind of its weight. Time is so short and I have so much to say, that unless you will allow me to place together two apparently unrelated statements and trust to you to pull them together, you must be content with a mere skeleton of the play I might have given you. Such is the argument. Euripides therefore

suffers less than Sophocles and less than Aeschylus from being read privately in a room, and not seen on a hillside in the sunshine. He can be acted in the mind; he can comment upon the questions of the moment; more than the others he will vary in popularity from age to age.

If then in Sophocles the play is concentrated in the figures themselves, and in Euripides is to be retrieved from flashes of poetry and questions far flung and unanswered, Aeschylus makes these little dramas (the *Agamemnon* has 1663 lines; *Lear* about 2600) tremendous by stretching every phrase to the utmost, by sending them floating forth in metaphors, by bidding them rise up and stalk eyeless and majestic through the scene. To understand him it is not so necessary to understand Greek as to understand poetry. It is necessary to take that dangerous leap through the air without the support of words which Shakespeare also asks of us. For words, when opposed to such a blast of meaning, must give out, must be blown astray, and only by collecting in companies convey the meaning which each one separately is too weak to express. Connecting them in a rapid flight of the mind we know instantly and instinctively what they mean, but could not decant that meaning afresh into any other words. There is an ambiguity which is the mark of the highest poetry; we cannot know exactly what it means. Take this from the *Agamemnon* for instance—

ὀμμάτων δ' ἐν ἀχηνίαις ἔρρει πᾶσ' Ἀφροδίτα.

The meaning is just on the far side of language. It is the meaning which in moments of astonishing excitement and stress we perceive in our minds without words; it is the meaning that Dostoevsky (hampered as he was by prose and as we are by translation) leads us to by some astonishing run up the scale of emotions and points at but cannot indicate; the meaning that Shakespeare succeeds in snaring.

Aeschylus thus will not give, as Sophocles gives, the very words that people might have spoken, only so arranged that they have in some mysterious way a general force, a symbolic power, nor like Euripides will he combine incongruities and thus enlarge his little space, as a small room is enlarged by mirrors in odd corners. By the bold and running use of metaphor he will amplify and give us, not the thing itself, but the reverberation and reflection which,

taken into his mind, the thing has made; close enough to the original to illustrate it, remote enough to heighten, enlarge, and make splendid.

For none of these dramatists had the licence which belongs to the novelist, and, in some degree, to all writers of printed books, of modelling their meaning with an infinity of slight touches which can only be properly applied by reading quietly, carefully, and sometimes two or three times over. Every sentence had to explode on striking the ear, however slowly and beautifully the words might then descend, and however enigmatic might their final purport be. No splendour or richness of metaphor could have saved the *Agamemnon* if either images or allusions of the subtlest or most decorative had got between us and the naked cry

ὅτοτοτοῖ πόποι δᾶ. ὦ 'πολλον, ὦ 'πολλον.

Dramatic they had to be at whatever cost.

But winter fell on these villages, darkness and extreme cold descended on the hillside. There must have been some place indoors where men could retire, both in the depths of winter and in the summer heats, where they could sit and drink, where they could lie stretched at their ease, where they could talk. It is Plato, of course, who reveals the life indoors, and describes how, when a party of friends met and had eaten not at all luxuriously and drunk a little wine, some handsome boy ventured a question, or quoted an opinion, and Socrates took it up, fingered it, turned it round, looked at it this way and that, swiftly stripped it of its inconsistencies and falsities and brought the whole company by degrees to gaze with him at the truth. It is an exhausting process; to concentrate painfully upon the exact meaning of words; to judge what each admission involves; to follow intently, yet critically, the dwindling and changing of opinion as it hardens and intensifies into truth. Are pleasure and good the same? Can virtue be taught? Is virtue knowledge? The tired or feeble mind may easily lapse as the remorseless questioning proceeds; but no one, however weak, can fail, even if he does not learn more from Plato, to love knowledge better. For as the argument mounts from step to step, Protagoras yielding, Socrates pushing on, what matters is not so much the end we reach as our manner of reaching it. That all can feel—the indomitable honesty, the courage, the love of

truth which draw Socrates and us in his wake to the summit where, if we too may stand for a moment, it is to enjoy the greatest felicity of which we are capable.

Yet such an expression seems ill-fitted to describe the state of mind of a student to whom, after painful argument, the truth has been revealed. But truth is various; truth comes to us in different disguises; it is not with the intellect alone that we perceive it. It is a winter's night; the tables are spread at Agathon's house; the girl is playing the flute; Socrates has washed himself and put on sandals; he has stopped in the hall; he refuses to move when they send for him. Now Socrates has done; he is bantering Alcibiades; Alcibiades takes a fillet and binds it round 'this wonderful fellow's head'. He praises Socrates. 'For he cares not for mere beauty, but despises more than anyone can imagine all external possessions, whether it be beauty or wealth or glory, or any other thing for which the multitude felicitates the possessor. He esteems these things and us who honour them, as nothing, and lives among men, making all the objects of their admiration the playthings of his irony. But I know not if any one of you has ever seen the divine images which are within, when he has been opened and is serious. I have seen them, and they are so supremely beautiful, so golden, divine, and wonderful, that everything which Socrates commands surely ought to be obeyed even like the voice of a God.' All this flows over the arguments of Plato—laughter and movement; people getting up and going out; the hour changing; tempers being lost; jokes cracked; the dawn rising. Truth, it seems, is various; Truth is to be pursued with all our faculties. Are we to rule out the amusements, the tendernesses, the frivolities of friendship because we love truth? Will truth be quicker found because we stop our ears to music and drink no wine, and sleep instead of talking through the long winter's night? It is not to the cloistered disciplinarian mortifying himself in solitude that we are to turn, but to the well-sunned nature, the man who practises the art of living to the best advantage, so that nothing is stunted but some things are permanently more valuable than others.

So in these dialogues we are made to seek truth with every part of us. For Plato, of course, had the dramatic genius. It is by means of that, by an art which conveys in a sentence or two the setting and the atmosphere, and then with perfect adroitness insinuates itself

into the coils of the argument without losing its liveliness and grace, and then contracts to bare statement, and then, mounting, expands and soars in that higher air which is generally reached only by the more extreme measures of poetry—it is this art which plays upon us in so many ways at once and brings us to an exultation of mind which can only be reached when all the powers are called upon to contribute their energy to the whole.

But we must beware. Socrates did not care for 'mere beauty', by which he meant, perhaps, beauty as ornament. A people who judged as much as the Athenians did by ear, sitting out-of-doors at the play or listening to argument in the market-place, were far less apt than we are to break off sentences and appreciate them apart from the context. For them there were no Beauties of Hardy, Beauties of Meredith, Sayings from George Eliot. The writer had to think more of the whole and less of the detail. Naturally, living in the open, it was not the lip or the eye that struck them, but the carriage of the body and the proportions of its parts. Thus when we quote and extract we do the Greeks more damage than we do the English. There is a bareness and abruptness in their literature which grates upon a taste accustomed to the intricacy and finish of printed books. We have to stretch our minds, to grasp a whole devoid of the prettiness of detail or the emphasis of eloquence. Accustomed to look directly and largely rather than minutely and aslant, it was safe for them to step into the thick of emotions which blind and bewilder an age like our own. In the vast catastrophe of the European war our emotions had to be broken up for us, and put at an angle from us, before we could allow ourselves to feel them in poetry or fiction. The only poets who spoke to the purpose spoke in the sidelong, satiric manner of Wilfrid Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. It was not possible for them to be direct without being clumsy; or to speak simply of emotion without being sentimental. But the Greeks could say, as if for the first time, 'Yet being dead they have not died'. They could say, 'If to die nobly is the chief part of excellence, to us out of all men Fortune gave this lot; for hastening to set a crown of freedom on Greece we lie possessed of praise that grows not old'. They could march straight up, with their eyes open; and thus fearlessly approached, emotions stand still and suffer themselves to be looked at.

But again (the question comes back and back), are we reading .

Greek as it was written when we say this? When we read these few words cut on a tombstone, a stanza in a chorus, the end or the opening of a dialogue of Plato's, a fragment of Sappho, when we bruise our minds upon some tremendous metaphor in the *Agamemnon* instead of stripping the branch of its flowers instantly as we do in reading *Lear*—are we not reading wrongly? losing our sharp sight in the haze of associations? reading into Greek poetry not what they have but what we lack? Does not the whole of Greece heap itself behind every line of its literature? They admit us to a vision of the earth unravaged, the sea unpolluted, the maturity, tried but unbroken, of mankind. Every word is reinforced by a vigour which pours out of olive-tree and temple and the bodies of the young. The nightingale has only to be named by Sophocles and she sings; the grove has only to be called *ἄβατον*, 'untrodden', and we imagine the twisted branches and the purple violets. Back and back we are drawn to steep ourselves in what, perhaps, is only an image of the reality, not the reality itself, a summer's day imagined in the heart of a northern winter. Chief among these sources of glamour and perhaps misunderstanding is the language. We can never hope to get the whole fling of a sentence in Greek as we do in English. We cannot hear it, now dissonant, now harmonious, tossing sound from line to line across a page. We cannot pick up infallibly one by one all those minute signals by which a phrase is made to hint, to turn, to live. Nevertheless, it is the language that has us most in bondage; the desire for that which perpetually lures us back. First there is the compactness of the expression. Shelley takes twenty-one words in English to translate thirteen words of Greek—*πᾶς γοῦν ποιητῆς γίγνεται, κἂν ἄμουσος ἢ τὸ πρὶν, οὐδ' ἂν Ἔρως ἀψήγεται* ('... for everyone, even if before he were ever so undisciplined, becomes a poet as soon as he is touched by love').

Every ounce of fat has been pared off, leaving the flesh firm. Then, spare and bare as it is, no language can move more quickly, dancing, shaking, all alive, but controlled. Then there are the words themselves which, in so many instances, we have made expressive to us of our own emotions, *θάλασσα*, *θάνατος*, *ἄνθος*, *ἀστήρ*, *σελήνη*—to take the first that come to hand; so clear, so hard, so intense, that to speak plainly yet fittingly without blurring the outline or clouding the depths, Greek is the only expression. It is useless, then, to read Greek in translations. Translators can but

offer us a vague equivalent; their language is necessarily full of echoes and associations. Professor Mackail says 'wan', and the age of Burne-Jones and Morris is at once evoked. Nor can the subtler stress, the flight and the fall of the words, be kept even by the most skilful of scholars—

... thee, who evermore weepest in thy rocky tomb

is not

ἄτ' ἐν τάφῳ πετραίῳ
αἰεὶ δακρύεις.

Further, in reckoning the doubts and difficulties there is this important problem—where are we to laugh in reading Greek? There is a passage in the *Odyssey* where laughter begins to steal upon us, but if Homer were looking we should probably think it better to control our merriment. To laugh instantly it is almost necessary (though Aristophanes may supply us with an exception) to laugh in English. Humour, after all, is closely bound up with a sense of the body. When we laugh at the humour of Wycherley, we are laughing with the body of that burly rustic who was our common ancestor on the village green. The French, the Italians, the Americans, who derive physically from so different a stock, pause, as we pause in reading Homer, to make sure that they are laughing in the right place, and the pause is fatal. Thus humour is the first of the gifts to perish in a foreign tongue, and when we turn from Greek to English literature it seems, after a long silence, as if our great age were ushered in by a burst of laughter.

These are all difficulties, sources of misunderstanding, of distorted and romantic, of servile and snobbish passion. Yet even for the unlearned some certainties remain. Greek is the impersonal literature; it is also the literature of masterpieces. There are no schools; no forerunners; no heirs. We cannot trace a gradual process working in many men imperfectly until it expresses itself adequately at last in one. Again, there is always about Greek literature that air of vigour which permeates an 'age', whether it is the age of Aeschylus, or Racine, or Shakespeare. One generation at least in that fortunate time is blown on to be writers to the extreme; to attain that unconsciousness which means that the consciousness is stimulated to the highest extent; to surpass the

limits of small triumphs and tentative experiments. Thus we have Sappho with her constellations of adjectives; Plato daring extravagant flights of poetry in the midst of prose; Thucydides, constricted and contracted; Sophocles gliding like a shoal of trout smoothly and quietly, apparently motionless, and then, with a flicker of fins, off and away; while in the *Odyssey* we have what remains the triumph of narrative, the clearest and at the same time the most romantic story of the fortunes of men and women.

The *Odyssey* is merely a story of adventure, the instinctive storytelling of a seafaring race. So we may begin it, reading quickly in the spirit of children wanting amusement to find out what happens next. But here is nothing immature; here are full-grown people, crafty, subtle, and passionate. Nor is the world itself a small one, since the sea which separates island from island has to be crossed by little hand-made boats and is measured by the flight of the sea-gulls. It is true that the islands are not thickly populated, and the people, though everything is made by hand, are not closely kept at work. They have had time to develop a very dignified, a very stately society, with an ancient tradition of manners behind it, which makes every relation at once orderly, natural, and full of reserve. Penelope crosses the room; Telemachus goes to bed; Nausicaa washes her linen; and their actions seem laden with beauty because they do not know that they are beautiful, have been born to their possessions, are no more self-conscious than children, and yet, all those thousands of years ago, in their little islands, know all that is to be known. With the sound of the sea in their ears, vines, meadows, rivulets about them, they are even more aware than we are of a ruthless fate. There is a sadness at the back of life which they do not attempt to mitigate. Entirely aware of their own standing in the shadow, and yet alive to every tremor and gleam of existence, there they endure, and it is to the Greeks that we turn when we are sick of the vagueness, of the confusion, of the Christianity and its consolations, of our own age.

The Faery Queen

THE FAERY QUEEN, it is said, has never been read to the end; no one has ever wished *Paradise Lost*, it is said, a word longer; and these remarks however exaggerated probably give pleasure, like a child's laugh at a ceremony, because they express something we secretly feel and yet try to hide. Dare we then at this time of day come out with the remark that *The Faery Queen* is a great poem? So one might say early rising, cold bathing, abstention from wine and tobacco are good; and if one said it, a blank look would steal over the company as they made haste to agree and then to lower the tone of the conversation. Yet it is true. Here are some general observations made by one who has gone through the experience, and wishes to urge others, who may be hiding their yawns and their polite boredom, to the same experience.

The first essential is, of course, not to read *The Faery Queen*. Put it off as long as possible. Grind out politics; absorb science; wallow in fiction; walk about London; observe the crowds; calculate the loss of life and limb; rub shoulders with the poor in markets; buy and sell; fix the mind firmly on the financial columns of the newspapers, weather; on the crops; on the fashions. At the mere mention of chivalry shiver and snigger; detest allegory; revel in direct speech; adore all the virtues of the robust, the plain-spoken; and then, when the whole being is red and brittle as sandstone in the sun, make a dash for *The Faery Queen* and give yourself up to it.

But reading poetry is a complex art. The mind has many layers, and the greater the poem the more of these are roused and brought into action. They seem, too, to be in order. The faculty we employ upon poetry at the first reading is sensual; the eye of the mind opens. And Spenser rouses the eye softly and brilliantly with his green trees, his pearly women, his crested and plumed knights. (Then we need to use our sympathies, not the strong passions, but the simple wish to go with our knight and his lady to feel their heat and cold, and their thirst and hunger.) And then we need movement. Their figures, as they pass along the grass track, must reach a hovel or a palace or find a man in weeds reading his book. That too is gratified. And then living thus with our eyes, with our legs

and arms, with the natural quiet feelings of liking and disliking tolerantly and gently excited, we realise a more complex desire that all these emotions should combine. There must be a pervading sense of belief, or much of our emotion will be wasted. The tree must be part of the knight; the knight of the lady. All these states of mind must support one another, and the strength of the poem will come from the combination, just as it will fail if at any point the poet loses belief.

But it may be said, when a poet is dealing with Faery Land and the supernatural people who live there, belief can only be used in a special sense. We do not believe in the existence of giants and ogres, but in something that the poet himself believed them to represent. What then was Spenser's belief, when he wrote his poem? He has himself declared that the 'general intention and meaning' of *The Faery Queen* was 'to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and noble discipline'. It would be absurd to pretend that we are more than intermittently conscious of the poet's meaning. Yet as we read, we half-consciously have the sense of some pattern hanging in the sky, so that without referring any of the words to a special place, they have that meaning which comes from their being parts of a whole design, and not an isolated fragment of unrelated loveliness. The mind is being perpetually enlarged by the power of suggestion. Much more is imagined than is stated. And it is due to this quality that the poem changes, with time, so that after four hundred years it still corresponds to something which we, who are momentarily in the flesh, feel at the moment.

The question asks itself, then, how Spenser, himself imprisoned in so many impediments of circumstance, remote from us in time, in speech, in convention, yet seems to be talking about things that are important to us too? Compare, for example, his perfect gentleman with Tennyson's Arthur. Already, much in Tennyson's pattern is unintelligible; an easy butt for satire. Among living writers again, there is none who is able to display a typical figure. Each seems limited to one room of the human dwelling. But with Spenser, though here in this department of our being, we seem able to unlock the door and walk about. We miss certain intensities and details; but on the other hand we are uncabined. We are allowed to give scope to a number of interests, delights, curiosities, and loves that find no satisfaction in the poetry of our own time. But

though it would be easy to frame a reason for this and to generalize about the decay of faith, the rise of machines, the isolation of the human being, let us, however, work from the opposite point of view. In reading *The Faery Queen* the first thing, we said, was that the mind has different layers. It brings one into play and then another. The desire of the eye, the desire of the body, desires for rhythm, movement, the desire for adventure—each is gratified. And this gratification depends upon the poet's own mobility. He is alive in all his parts. He scarcely seems to prefer one to another. We are reminded of the old myth of the body which has many organs, and the lesser and the obscure are as important as the kingly and important.

Here at any rate the poet's body seems all alive. A fearlessness, a simplicity that is like the movement of a naked savage possesses him. He is not merely a thinking brain; he is a feeling body, a sensitive heart. He has hands and feet, and, as he says himself, a natural chastity, so that some things are judged unfit for the pen. 'My chaster muse for shame doth blush to write.' In short, when we read *The Faery Queen*, we feel that the whole being is drawn upon, not merely a separate part.

To say this is to say that the conventions that Spenser uses are not enough to cut us off from the inner meaning. And the reason soon makes itself apparent. When we talk of the modern distaste for allegory, we are only saying that we prefer our qualities in another form. The novelist uses allegory; that is to say, when he wishes to expound his characters, he makes them think; Spenser impersonated his psychology. Thus if the novelist now wished to convey his hero's gloom, he would tell us his thoughts; Spenser creates a figure called Despair. He has the fullest sense of what sorrow is. But he typifies it; he creates a dwelling, an old man who comes out of the house and says I cannot tell; and then the figure of Despair with his beautiful elegy. Instead of being prisoned in one breast we are shown the outer semblance. He is working thus on a larger, freer, more depersonalized scale. By making the passions into people, he gives them an amplitude. And who shall say that this is the less natural, the less realistic? For the most exact observer has to leave much of his people's minds obscure.

Once we get him out of his private mythology, there is no mythology which can personify his actions. We wish to convey

delight and have to describe an actual garden, here and now; Spenser at once calls up a picture of nymphs dancing, youth, maidens crowned. And yet it is not pictorial merely. Nothing is more refreshing, nothing serves more to sting and revive us than the spray of fresh hard words, little colloquialisms, tart green words that might have been spoken at dinner, joining in easily with the more stately tribe. But such externality is impossible to us, because we have lost our power to create symbols. Spenser's ability to use despair in person depends on his power to create a world in which such a figure draws natural breath, living breath. He has his dwelling at the centre of a universe which offers him the use of dragons, knights, magic; and all the company that exist about them; and flowers and dawn and sunset. All this was still just within his reach. He could believe in it, his public could believe in it, sufficiently to make it serviceable. It was, of course, just slipping from his grasp. That is obvious from his own words. His poem, he says, will be called the abundance of an idle brain. His language, too, oddly compounded of the high-flown and the vernacular, was just then at the turn. On the one hand we have the old smooth conventions—Tithonus, Cynthia, Phoebus, and the rest; on the other fry and rascal and losel, the common speech that was current on the lips of the women at the door. He was not asking the reader to adopt an unnatural pose; only to think poetically. And the writer's faith is still effective. We are removed four hundred years from Spenser; and the effort to think back into his mood requires some adjustment, some oblivion; but there is nothing false in what is to be done; it is easier to read Spenser than to read William Morris.

The true difficulty lies elsewhere. It lies in the fact that the poem is a meditation, not a dramatization. At no point is Spenser under the necessity of bringing his characters to the surface; they lack the final embodiment which is forced so drastically upon the playwright. They sink back into the poet's mind and thus lack definition. He is talking about them; they are not using their own words. Hence the indistinctness which leads, as undoubtedly it does lead, to monotony. The verse becomes for a time a rocking-horse; swaying up and down; a celestial rocking-horse, whose pace is always rhythmical and seemly, but lulling, soporific. It sings us to sleep; it lulls the teeth of the wind. On no other terms, however, could

we be kept in being. And to compensate we have the quality of that mind; the sense that we are confined in one continuous consciousness, which is Spenser's; that he has saturated and enclosed this world, that we live in a great bubble blown from the poet's brain. Yet if it ignores our own marks, houses, chimneys, roads, the multitudinous details which serve like signposts or features to indicate to us where our emotions lie, it is not a private world of fantasy. Here are the qualities that agitate living people at the moment; spite, greed, jealousy, ugliness, poverty, pain; Spenser in his poet's castle was as acutely aware of the rubs and tumbles of life as the living, but by virtue of his poetry blew them away into the higher air. So we feel not shut in, but freed; and take our way in a world which gives expression to sensation more vigorously, more exactly than we can manage for ourselves in the flesh. It is a world of astonishing physical brilliance and intensity; sharpened, intensified as objects are in a clearer air; such as we see them, not in dreams, but when all the faculties are alert and vigorous; when the stuffing and the detail have been brushed aside; and we see the bone and the symmetry; now in a landscape, in Ireland or in Greece; and now when we think of ourselves, under the more intense ray of poetry; under its sharper, its lovelier light.

'The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia'

IF it is true that there are books written to escape from the present moment, and its meanness and its sordidity, it is certainly true that readers are familiar with a corresponding mood. To draw the blinds and shut the door, to muffle the noises of the street and shade the glare and flicker of its lights—that is our desire. There is then a charm even in the look of the great volumes that have sunk, like the 'Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia', as if by their own weight down to the very bottom of the shelf. We like to feel that the present is not all; that other hands have been before us, smoothing the leather until the corners are rounded and blunt, turning the pages until they are yellow and dog's-eared. We like to summon before us the ghosts of those old readers who have read their *Arcadia* from this very copy — Richard Porter, reading with the splendours of the Elizabethans in his eyes; Lucy Baxter, reading in the licentious days of the Restoration; Thos. Hake, still reading, though now the eighteenth century has dawned with a distinction that shows itself in the upright elegance of his signature. Each has read differently, with the insight and the blindness of his own generation. Our reading will be equally partial. In 1930 we shall miss a great deal that was obvious to 1655; we shall see some things that the eighteenth century ignored. But let us keep up the long succession of readers; let us in our turn bring the insight and the blindness of our own generation to bear upon the 'Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia', and so pass it on to our successors.

If we choose the *Arcadia* because we wish to escape, certainly the first impression of the book is that Sidney wrote it with very much the same intention: '... it is done only for you, only to you', he tells his 'dear lady and sister, the Countess of Pembroke'. He is not looking at what is before him here at Wilton; he is not thinking of his own troubles or of the tempestuous mood of the great Queen in London. He is absenting himself from the present and its strife. He is writing merely to amuse his sister, not for 'severer eyes'. 'Your dear self can best witness the manner, being done in loose sheets of Paper, most of it in your presence, the rest, by sheets sent unto you, as fast as they were done.' So, sitting at Wilton under the downs

with Lady Pembroke, he gazes far away into a beautiful land which he calls Arcadia. It is a land of fair valleys and fertile pastures, where the houses are 'lodges of yellow stone built in the form of a star'; where the inhabitants are either great princes or humble shepherds; where the only business is to love and to adventure; where bears and lions surprise nymphs bathing in fields red with roses; where princesses are immured in the huts of shepherds; where disguise is perpetually necessary; where the shepherd is really a prince and the woman a man; where, in short, anything may be and happen except what actually is and happens here in England in the year 1580. It is easy to see why, as Sidney handed these dream pages to his sister, he smiled, entreating her indulgence. 'Read it then at your idle times, and the follies your good judgment will find in it, blame not, but laugh at.' Even for the Sidneys and the Pembrokes life was not quite like that. And yet the life that we invent, the stories we tell, as we sink back with half-shut eyes and pour forth our irresponsible dreams, have perhaps some wild beauty; some eager energy; we often reveal in them the distorted and decorated image of what we soberly and secretly desire. Thus the *Arcadia*, by wilfully flouting all contact with the fact, gains another reality. When Sidney hinted that his friends would like the book for its writer's sake, he meant perhaps that they would find there something that he could say in no other form, as the shepherds singing by the river's side will 'deliver out, sometimes joys, sometimes lamentations, sometimes challengings one of the other, sometimes, under hidden forms, uttering such matters as otherwise they durst not deal with'. There may be under the disguise of the *Arcadia* a real man trying to speak privately about something that is close to his heart. But in the first freshness of the early pages the disguise itself is enough to enchant us. We find ourselves with shepherds in spring on those sands which 'lie against the Island of Cithera'. Then, behold, something floats on the waters. It is the body of a man, and he grasps to his breast a small square coffer; and he is young and beautiful—'though he were naked, his nakedness was to him an apparel'; and his name is Musidorus; and he has lost his friend. So, warbling melodiously, the shepherds revive the youth, and row out in a bark from the haven in search of Pyrocles; and a stain appears on the sea, with sparks and smoke issuing from it. For the ship upon which the two

princes Musidorus and Pyrocles were voyaging has caught fire; it floats blazing on the water with a great store of rich things round it, and many drowned bodies. ‘In sum, a defeat, where the conquered kept both field and spoil: a shipwreck without storm or ill footing: and a waste of fire in the midst of the water.’

There in a little space we have some of the elements that are woven together to compose this vast tapestry. We have beauty of scene; a pictorial stillness; and something floating towards us, not violently but slowly and gently in time to the sweet warbling of the shepherds’ voices. Now and again this crystallises into a phrase that lingers and haunts the ear—‘and a waste of fire in the midst of the waters’; ‘having in their faces a certain waiting sorrow’. Now the murmur broadens and expands into some more elaborate passage of description: ‘each pasture stored with sheep, feeding with sober security, while the pretty lambs with bleating oratory crav’d the dam’s comfort: here a shepherd’s boy piping, as though he should never be old: there a young shepherdess knitting, and withal singing, and it seemed that her voice comforted her hands to work, and her hands kept time to her voice-music’—a passage that reminds us of a famous description in Dorothy Osborne’s *Letters*.

Beauty of scene; stateliness of movement; sweetness of sound—these are the graces that seem to reward the mind that seeks enjoyment purely for its own sake. We are drawn on down the winding paths of this impossible landscape because Sidney leads us without any end in view but sheer delight in wandering. The syllabbling of the words even causes him the liveliest delight. Mere rhythm we feel as we sweep over the smooth backs of the undulating sentences intoxicates him. Words in themselves delight him. Look, he seems to cry, as he picks up the glittering handfuls, can it be true that there are such numbers of beautiful words lying about for the asking? Why not use them, lavishly and abundantly? And so he luxuriates. Lambs do not suck—‘with bleating oratory [they] craved the dam’s comfort’; girls do not undress—they ‘take away the eclipsing of their apparel’; a tree is not reflected in a river—‘it seemed she looked into it and dressed her green locks by that running river’. It is absurd; and yet there is a world of difference between writing like this with zest and wonder at the images that form upon one’s pen and the writing of later ages when the dew was off the language—witness the little tremor that stirs and

agitates a sentence that a more formal age would have made coldly symmetrical:

And the boy fierce though beautiful; and beautiful, though dying, not able to keep his falling feet, fell down to the earth, which he bit for anger, repining at his fortune, and as long as he could, resisting death, which might seem unwilling too; so long he was in taking away his young struggling soul.

It is this inequality and elasticity that lend their freshness to Sidney's vast pages. Often as we rush through them, half laughing, half in protest, the desire comes upon us to shut the ear of reason completely and lie back and listen to this unformed babble of sound; this chorus of intoxicated voices singing madly like birds round the house before anyone is up.

But it is easy to lay too much stress upon qualities that delight us because they are lost. Sidney doubtless wrote the *Arcadia* partly to while away the time, partly to exercise his pen and experiment with the new instrument of the English language. But even so he remained young and a man; even in *Arcadia* the roads had ruts, and coaches were upset and ladies dislocated their shoulders; even the Princes Musidorus and Pyrocles have passions; Pamela and Philoclea, for all their sea-coloured satins and nets strung with pearls, are women and can love. Thus we stumble upon scenes that cannot be reeled off with a flowing pen; there are moments where Sidney stopped and thought, like any other novelist, what a real man or woman in this particular situation would say; where his own emotions come suddenly to the surface and light up the vague pastoral landscape with an incongruous glare. For a moment we get a surprising combination; crude daylight overpowers the silver lights of the tapers; shepherds and princesses suddenly stop their warbling and speak a few rapid words in their eager human voices.

. . . many times have I, leaning to yonder Palm, admired the blessedness of it, that it could bear love without sense of pain; many times, when my Master's cattle came hither to chew their cud in this fresh place, I might see the young Bull testify his love; but how? with proud looks and joyfulness. O wretched mankind (said I then to myself) in whom wit (which should be

the governor of his welfare) become’s the traitor to his blessedness: these beasts like children to nature, inherit her blessings quietly; we like bastards are laid abroad, even as foundlings, to be trained up by grief and sorrow. Their minds grudge not at their bodies comfort, nor their senses are letted from enjoying their objects; we have the impediments of honour, and the torments of conscience.

The words ring strangely on the finicking, dandified lips of Musidorus. There is Sidney’s own anger in them and his pain. And then the novelist Sidney suddenly opens his eyes. He watches Pamela as she takes the jewel in the figure of a crab-fish to signify ‘because it looks one way and goes another’ that though he pretended to love Mopsa his heart was Pamela’s. And she takes it, he notes,

with a calm carelessness letting each thing slide (just as we do by their speeches who neither in matter nor person do any way belong unto us) which kind of cold temper, mixt with that lightning of her natural majesty, is of all others most terrible unto me. . . .

Had she despised him, had she hated him, it would have been better.

But this cruel quietness, neither retiring to mislike, nor proceeding to favour; gracious, but gracious still after one manner; all her courtesies having this engraven in them, that what is done, is for virtue’s sake, not for the parties. . . . This (I say) heavenliness of hers . . . is so impossible to reach unto that I almost begin to submit myself unto the tyranny of despair, not knowing any way of persuasion. . . .

—surely an acute and subtle observation made by a man who had felt what he describes. For a moment the pale and legendary figures, Gynecia, Philoclea, and Zelmane, become alive; their featureless faces work with passion; Gynecia, realizing that she loves her daughter’s lover, foams into grandeur, ‘crying vehemently Zelmane help me, O Zelmane have pity on me’; and the old King, in whom the beautiful strange Amazon has awakened a senile

amorosity, shows himself old and foolish, looking 'very curiously upon himself, sometimes fetching a little skip, as if he had said his strength had not yet forsaken him'.

But that moment of illumination, as it dies down and the princes once more resume their postures and the shepherds apply themselves to their lutes, throws a curious light upon the book as a whole. We realize more clearly the boundaries within which Sidney was working. For a moment he could note and observe and record as keenly and exactly as any modern novelist. And then, after this one glimpse in our direction, he turns aside, as if he heard other voices calling him and must obey their commands. In prose, he bethinks himself, one must not use the common words of daily speech. In a romance one must not make princes and princesses feel like ordinary men and women. Humour is the attribute of peasants. They can behave ridiculously; they can talk naturally; like Darnetas they can come 'whistling, and counting upon his fingers, how many load of hay seventeen fat oxen eat up on a year'; but the language of great people must always be long-winded and abstract and full of metaphors. Further, they must either be heroes of stainless virtue, or villains untouched by humanity. Of human oddities and littleness they must show no trace. Prose also must be careful to turn away from what is actually before it. Sometimes for a moment in looking at Nature one may fit the word to the sight; note the heron 'wagling' as it rises from the marsh, or observe the water-spaniel hunting the duck 'with a snuffling grace'. But this realism is only to be applied to Nature and animals and peasants. Prose, it seems, is made for slow, noble, and generalized emotions; for the description of wide landscapes; for the conveyance of long, equable discourses uninterrupted for pages together by any other speaker. Verse, on the other hand, had quite a different office. It is curious to observe how, when Sidney wished to sum up, to strike hard, to register a single and definite impression, he turns to verse. Verse in the *Arcadia* performs something of the function of dialogue in the modern novel. It breaks up the monotony and strikes a high-light. In those snatches of song that are scattered about the interminable adventures of Pyrocles and Musidorus our interest is once more fanned into flame. Often the realism and vigour of the verse comes with a shock after the drowsy languor of the prose:

‘THE COUNTESS OF PEMBROKE’S ARCADIA’

What needed so high spirits such mansions blind?
Or wrapt in flesh what do they here obtain,
But glorious name of wretched human kind?
Balls to the stars, and thralls to fortune’s reign;
Turn’d from themselves, infected with their cage,
Where death is fear’d, and life is held with pain.
Like players plac’d to fill a filthy stage. . . .

—one wonders what the indolent princes and princesses will make of that vehement speaking? Or of this:

A shop of shame, a Book where blots be rife,
This body is . . .
This man, this talking beast, this walking tree.

—thus the poet turns upon his languid company as if he loathed their self-complacent foppery; and yet must indulge them. For though it is clear that the poet Sidney had shrewd eyes—he talks of ‘hives of wisely painful bees’, and knew like any other country-bred Englishman ‘how shepherds spend their days. At blow-point, hot-cockles or else at keels’,—still he must drone on about Plangus and Erona, and Queen Andromana and the intrigues of Amphialus and his mother Cecropia in deference to his audience. Incongruously enough, violent as they were in their lives, with their plots and their poisonings, nothing can be too sweet, too vague, too long-winded for those Elizabethan listeners. Only the fact that Zelmane had received a blow from a lion’s paw that morning can shorten the story and suggest to Basilius that it might be better to reserve the complaint of Klaius till another day.

Which she, perceiving the song had already worn out much time, and not knowing when Lamon would end, being even now stepping over to a new matter, though much delighted with what was spoken, willingly agreed unto. And so of all sides they went to recommend themselves to the elder brother of death.

And as the story winds on its way, or rather as the succession of stories fall on each other like soft snowflakes, one obliterating the other, we are much tempted to follow their example. Sleep weighs

down our eyes. Half dreaming, half yawning, we prepare to seek the elder brother of death. What, then, has become of that first intoxicating sense of freedom? We who wished to escape have been caught and enmeshed. Yet how easy it seemed in the beginning to tell a story to amuse a sister---how inspiring to escape from here and now and wander wildly in a world of lutes and roses! But alas, softness has weighed down our steps; brambles have caught at our clothing. We have come to long for some plain statement, and the decoration of the style, at first so enchanting, has dulled and decayed. It is not difficult to find the reason. High-spirited, flown with words, Sidney seized his pen too carelessly. He had no notion when he set out where he was going. Telling stories, he thought, was enough - one could follow another interminably. But where there is no end in view there is no sense of direction to draw us on. Nor, since it is part of his scheme to keep his characters simply bad and simply good without distinction, can he gain variety from the complexity of character. To supply change and movement he must have recourse to mystification. These changes of dress, these disguises of princes as peasants, of men as women, serve instead of psychological subtlety to relieve the stagnancy of people collected together with nothing to talk about. But when the charm of that childish device falls flat, there is no breath left to fill his sails. Who is talking, and to whom, and about what we no longer feel sure. So slack indeed becomes Sidney's grasp upon these ambling phantoms that in the middle he has forgotten what his relation to them is---is it 'I' the author who is speaking or is it 'I' the character? No reader can be kept in bondage, whatever the grace and the charm, when the ties between him and the writer are so irresponsibly doffed and assumed. So by degrees the book floats away into the thin air of limbo. It becomes one of those half-forgotten and deserted places where the grasses grow over fallen statues and the rain drips and the marble steps are green with moss and vast weeds flourish in the flower-beds. And yet it is a beautiful garden to wander in now and then; one stumbles over lovely broken faces, and here and there a flower blooms and the nightingale sings in the lilac-tree.

Thus when we come to the last page that Sidney wrote before he gave up the hopeless attempt to finish the *Arcadia*, we pause for a moment before we return the folio to its place on the bottom shelf.

In the *Arcadia*, as in some luminous globe, all the seeds of English fiction lie latent. We can trace infinite possibilities: it may take any one of many different directions. Will it fix its gaze upon Greece and princes and princesses, and seek as it might so nobly, the statuesque, the impersonal? Will it keep to simple lines and great masses and the vast landscapes of the epic? Or will it look closely and carefully at what is actually before it? Will it take for its heroes Dametas and Mopsa, ordinary people of low birth and rough natural speech, and deal with the normal course of daily human life? Or will it brush through those barriers and penetrate within to the anguish and complexity of some unhappy woman loving where she may not love; to the senile absurdity of some old man tortured by an incongruous passion? Will it make its dwelling in their psychology and the adventures of the soul? All these possibilities are present in the *Arcadia*—romance and realism, poetry and psychology. But as if Sidney knew that he had broached a task too large for his youth to execute, had bequeathed a legacy for other ages to inherit, he put down his pen, midway, and left unfinished in all its beauty and absurdity this attempt to while away the long days at Wilton, telling a story to his sister.

Twelfth Night at the Old Vic¹

SHAKESPEAREANS are divided, it is well known, into three classes; those who prefer to read Shakespeare in the book; those who prefer to see him acted on the stage; and those who run perpetually from book to stage gathering plunder. Certainly there is a good deal to be said for reading *Twelfth Night* in the book if the book can be read in a garden, with no sound but the thud of an apple falling to the earth, or of the wind ruffling the branches of the trees. For one thing there is time—time not only to hear ‘the sweet sound that breathes upon a bank of violets’ but to unfold the implications of that very subtle speech as the Duke winds into the nature of love. There is time, too, to make a note in the margin; time to wonder at queer jingles like ‘that live in her; when liver, brain, and heart’ . . . ‘and of a foolish knight that you brought in one night’ and to ask oneself whether it was from them that was born the lovely, ‘And what should I do in Illyria? My brother he is in Elysium.’ For Shakespeare is writing, it seems, not with the whole of his mind mobilized and under control but with feelers left flying that sport and play with words so that the trail of a chance word is caught and followed recklessly. From the echo of one word is born another word, for which reason, perhaps, the play seems as we read it to tremble perpetually on the brink of music. ‘They are always calling for songs in *Twelfth Night*, ‘O fellow come, the song we had last night.’ Yet Shakespeare was not so deeply in love with words but that he could turn and laugh at them. ‘They that do dally with words do quickly make them wanton.’ There is a roar of laughter and out burst Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, Maria. Words on their lips are things that have meaning; that rush and leap out with a whole character packed in a little phrase. When Sir Andrew says ‘I was adored once’, we feel that we hold him in the hollow of our hands; a novelist would have taken three volumes to bring us to that pitch of intimacy. And Viola, Malvolio, Olivia, the Duke—the mind so brims and spills over with all that we know and guess about them as they move in and out among the lights and shadows of the mind’s stage that we

¹ Written in 1933

ask why should we imprison them within the bodies of real men and women. Why exchange this garden for the theatre? The answer is that Shakespeare wrote for the stage and presumably with reason. Since they are acting *Twelfth Night* at the Old Vic, let us compare the two versions.

Many apples might fall without being heard in the Waterloo Road, and as for the shadows, the electric light has consumed them all. The first impression upon entering the Old Vic is overwhelmingly positive and definite. We seem to have issued out from the shadows of the garden upon the bridge of the Parthenon. The metaphor is mixed, but then so is the scenery. The columns of the bridge somehow suggest an Atlantic liner and the austere splendours of a classical temple in combination. But the body is almost as upsetting as the scenery. The actual persons of Malvolio, Sir Toby, Olivia, and the rest expand our visionary characters out of all recognition. At first we are inclined to resent it. You are not Malvolio; or Sir Toby either, we want to tell them; but merely impostors. We sit gaping at the ruins of the play, at the travesty of the play. And then by degrees this same body or rather all these bodies together, take our play and remodel it between them. The play gains immensely in robustness, in solidity. The printed word is changed out of all recognition when it is heard by other people. We watch it strike upon this man or woman; we see them laugh or shrug their shoulders, or turn aside to hide their faces. The word is given a body as well as a soul. Then again as the actors pause, or topple over a barrel, or stretch their hands out, the flatness of the print is broken up as by crevasses or precipices; all the proportions are changed. Perhaps the most impressive effect in the play is achieved by the long pause which Sebastian and Viola make as they stand looking at each other in a silent ecstasy of recognition. The reader's eye may have slipped over that moment entirely. Here we are made to pause and think about it; and are reminded that Shakespeare wrote for the body and for the mind simultaneously.

But now that the actors have done their proper work of solidifying and intensifying our impressions, we begin to criticize them more minutely and to compare their version with our own. We make Mr. Quartermaine's Malvolio stand beside our Malvolio. And to tell the truth, wherever the fault may lie, they have very

little in common. Mr. Quartermaine's Malvolio is a splendid gentleman, courteous, considerate, well bred; a man of parts and humour who has no quarrel with the world. He has never felt a twinge of vanity or a moment's envy in his life. If Sir Toby and Maria fool him he sees through it, we may be sure, and only suffers it as a fine gentleman puts up with the games of foolish children. Our Malvolio, on the other hand, was a fantastic complex creature, twitching with vanity, tortured by ambition. There was cruelty in his teasing, and a hint of tragedy in his defeat; his final threat had a momentary terror in it. But when Mr. Quartermaine says 'I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you', we feel merely that the powers of the law will be soon and effectively invoked. What, then, becomes of Olivia's 'He hath been most notoriously abused? Then there is Olivia. Madame Lopokova has by nature that rare quality which is neither to be had for the asking nor to be subdued by the will—the genius of personality. She has only to float on to the stage and everything round her suffers, not a sea change, but a change into light, into gaiety; the birds sing, the sheep are garlanded, the air rings with melody and human beings dance towards each other on the tips of their toes possessed of an exquisite friendliness, sympathy, and delight. But our Olivia was a stately lady; of sombre complexion, slow-moving, and of few sympathies. She could not love the Duke nor change her feeling. Madame Lopokova loves everybody. She is always changing. Her hands, her face, her feet, the whole of her body, are always quivering in sympathy with the moment. She could make the moment, as she proved when she walked down the stairs with Sebastian, one of intense and moving beauty; but she was not our Olivia. Compared with her the comic group, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, Maria, the fool were more than ordinarily English. Coarse, humorous, robust, they trolled out their words, they rolled over their barrels; they acted magnificently. No reader, one may make bold to say, could outpace Miss Seyler's Maria, with its quickness, its inventiveness, its merriment; nor add anything to the humours of Mr. Livesey's Sir Toby. And Miss Jeans as Viola was satisfactory; and Mr. Hare as Antonio was admirable; and Mr. Morland's clown was a good clown. What, then, was lacking in the play as a whole? Perhaps that it was not a whole. The fault may lie partly with Shakespeare. It is easier to act his comedy than his poetry, one may suppose, for when he

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wrote as a poet he was apt to write too quick for the human tongue. The prodigality of his metaphors can be flashed over by the eye, but the speaking voice falters in the middle. Hence the comedy was out of proportion to the rest. Then, perhaps, the actors were too highly charged with individuality or too incongruously cast. They broke the play up into separate pieces—now we were in the groves of Arcady, now in some inn at Blackfriars. The mind in reading spins a web from scene to scene, compounds a background from apples falling, and the toll of a church bell, and an owl's fantastic flight which keeps the play together. Here that continuity was sacrificed. We left the theatre possessed of many brilliant fragments but without the sense of all things conspiring and combining together which may be the satisfying culmination of a less brilliant performance. Nevertheless, the play has served its purpose. It has made us compare our Malvolio with Mr. Quartermaine's; our Olivia with Madame Lopokova's; our reading of the whole play with Mr. Guthrie's; and since they all differ, back we must go to Shakespeare. We must read *Twelfth Night* again. Mr. Guthrie has made that necessary and whetted our appetite for the *Cherry Orchard*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Henry the Eighth* that are still to come.

Donne after Three Centuries

WHEN we think how many millions of words have been written and printed in England in the past three hundred years, and how the vast majority have died out without leaving any trace, it is tempting to wonder what quality the words of Donne possess that we should still hear them distinctly today. Far be it from us to suggest even in this year of celebration and pardonable adulation (1931) that the poems of Donne are popular reading or that the typist, if we look over her shoulder in the Tube, is to be discovered reading Donne as she returns from her office. But he is read; he is audible—to that fact new editions and frequent articles testify, and it is worth perhaps trying to analyse the meaning that his voice has for us as it strikes upon the ear after this long flight across the stormy seas that separate us from the age of Elizabeth.

But the first quality that attracts us is not his meaning, charged with meaning as his poetry is, but something much more unmixed and immediate; it is the explosion with which he bursts into speech. All preface, all parleying have been consumed; he leaps into poetry the shortest way. One phrase consumes all preparation:

I long to talke with some old lover's ghost,

or

He is starke mad, whoever sayes,
That he hath beene in love an houre.

At once we are arrested. Stand still, he commands,

Stand still, and I will read to thee
A Lecture, Love, in love's philosophy.

And stand still we must. With the first words a shock passes through us; perceptions, previously numb and torpid, quiver into being; the nerves of sight and hearing are quickened; the 'bracelet of bright hair' burns in our eyes. But, more remarkably, we do not

merely become aware of beautiful remembered lines; we feel ourselves compelled to a particular attitude of mind. Elements that were dispersed in the usual stream of life become, under the stroke of Donne's passion, one and entire. The world, a moment before, cheerful, humdrum, bursting with character and variety, is consumed. We are in Donne's world now. All other views are sharply cut off.

In this power of suddenly surprising and subjugating the reader, Donne excels most poets. It is his characteristic quality; it is thus that he lays hold upon us, summing up his essence in a word or two. But it is an essence that, as it works in us, separates into strange contraries at odds with one another. Soon we begin to ask ourselves of what this essence is composed, what elements have met together to cut so deep and complex an impression. Some obvious clues lie strewn on the surface of the poems. When we read the *Satyres*, for example, we need no external proof to tell us that these are the work of a boy. He has all the ruthlessness and definiteness of youth, its hatred of the follies of middle age and of convention. Bores, liars, courtiers—detestable humbugs and hypocrites as they are, why not sum them up and sweep them off the face of the earth with a few strokes of the pen? And so these foolish figures are drubbed with an ardour that proves how much hope and faith and delight in life inspire the savagery of youthful scorn. But, as we read on, we begin to suspect that the boy with the complex and curious face of the early portrait—bold yet subtle, sensual yet nerve drawn—possessed qualities that made him singular among the young. It is not simply that the huddle and pressure of youth which out-thinks its words had urged him on too fast for grace or clarity. It may be that there is in this clipping and curtailing, this abrupt heaping of thought on thought, some deeper dissatisfaction than that of youth with age, of honesty with corruption. He is in rebellion, not merely against his elders, but against something antipathetic to him in the temper of his time. His verse has the deliberate bareness of those who refuse to avail themselves of the current usage. It has the extravagance of those who do not feel the pressure of opinion, so that sometimes judgment fails them, and they heap up strangeness for strangeness' sake. He is one of those nonconformists, like Browning and Meredith, who cannot resist glorifying their nonconformity by a dash of wilful and gratuitous

eccentricity. But to discover what Donne disliked in his own age, let us imagine some of the more obvious influences that must have told upon him when he wrote his early poems—let us ask what books he read. And by Donne's own testimony we find that his chosen books were the works of 'grave Divines'; of philosophers; of 'jolly Statesmen, which teach how to tie The sinewes of a cities mistique bodie'; and chroniclers. Clearly he liked facts and arguments. If there are also poets among his books, the epithets he applies to them, 'Giddie fantastique', seem to disparage the art, or at least to show that Donne knew perfectly well what qualities were antipathetic to him in poetry. And yet he was living in the very spring of English poetry. Some of Spenser might have been on his shelves; and Sidney's *Arcadia*; and the *Paradise of Dainty Devices*, and Lyly's *Euphues*. He had the chance, and apparently took it — 'I tell him of new playes' — of going to the theatre; of seeing the plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare acted. When he went abroad in London, he must have met all the writers of that time—Spenser and Sidney and Shakespeare and Jonson; he must have heard at this tavern or at that talk of new plays, of new fashions in verse, heated and learned discussion of the possibilities of the English language and the future of English poetry. And yet, if we turn to his biography, we find that he neither consorted with his contemporaries nor read what they wrote. He was one of those original beings who cannot draw profit, but are rather disturbed and distracted by what is being done round them at the moment. If we turn again to *Satyres*, it is easy to see why this should be so. Here is a bold and active mind that loves to deal with actual things, which struggles to express each shock exactly as it impinges upon his tight-stretched senses. A bore stops him in the street. He sees him exactly, vividly.

His cloths were strange, though coarse; and black,^a though bare;
 Sleevelesse his jerkin was, and it had beene
 Velvet, but t'was now (so much ground was seene)
 Become Tufftaffatie;

Then he likes to give the actual words that people say:

He, like to a high stretcht lute string squeakt, O Sir,
 'Tis sweet to talke of Kings. At Westminster,
 Said I, The man that keepes the Abbey tombes,
 And for his price doth with who ever comes,
 Of all our Harries, and our Edwards talke,
 From King to King and all their kin can walke:
 Your eares shall heare nought, but Kings; your eyes meet
 Kings only; The way to it, is Kingstreet.

His strength and his weakness are both to be found here. He selects one detail and stares at it until he has reduced it to the few words that express its oddity:

And like a bunch of ragged carrets stand
 The short swolne fingers of thy gouty hand,

but he cannot see in the round, as a whole. He cannot stand apart and survey the large outline so that the description is always of some momentary intensity, seldom of the broader aspect of things. Naturally, then, he found it difficult to use the drama with its conflict of other characters; he must always speak from his own centre in soliloquy, in satire, in self-analysis. Spenser, Sidney, and Marlowe provided no helpful models for a man who looked out from this angle of vision. The typical Elizabethan with his love of eloquence, with his longing for brave new words, tended to enlarge and generalize. He loved wide landscapes, heroic virtues, and figures seen sublimely in outline or in heroic conflict. Even the prose-writers have the same habit of aggrandisement. When Dekker sets out to tell us how Queen Elizabeth died in the spring, he cannot describe her death in particular or that spring in particular; he must dilate upon all deaths and all springs:

. . . the Cuckoo (like a single, sole Fiddler, that reels from Tavern to Tavern) plied it all the day long: Lambs frisked up and down in the vallies, kids and Goats leapt to and fro on the Mountains: Shepherds sat piping, country wenches singing: Lovers made Sonnets for their Lasses, whilst they made Garlands for their Lovers: And as the Country was frolic, so was the City merry . . . no Scritch-Owl frightened the silly Country-man at midnight, nor any Drum the Citizen at noon-day; but

all was more calm than a still water, all husht, as if the Spheres had been playing in Consort: In conclusion, heaven lookt like a Pallace, and the great hall of the earth, like a Paradise. But O the short-liv'd Felicity of man! O world, of what slight and thin stuff is thy happiness!

—in short, Queen Elizabeth died, and it is no use asking Dekker what the old woman who swept his room for him said, or what Cheapside looked like that night if one happened to be caught in the thick of the throng. He must enlarge; he must generalize; he must beautify.

Donne's genius was precisely the opposite of this. He diminished; he particularized. Not only did he see each spot and wrinkle which defaced the fair outline; but he noted with the utmost curiosity his own reaction to such contrasts and was eager to lay side by side the two conflicting views and to let them make their own dissonance. It is this desire for nakedness in an age that was florid, this determination to record not the likenesses which go to compose a rounded and seemly whole, but the inconsistencies that break up semblances, the power to make us feel the different emotions of love and hate and laughter at the same time, that separate Donne from his contemporaries. And if the usual traffic of the day—to be buttonholed by a bore, to be suared by a lawyer, to be snubbed by a courtier—made so sharp an impression on Donne, the effect of falling in love was bound to be incomparably greater. Falling in love meant, to Donne, a thousand things; it meant being tormented and disgusted, disillusioned and enraptured; but it also meant speaking the truth. The love poems, the elegies, and the letters thus reveal a figure of a very different calibre from the typical figure of Elizabethan love poetry. That great ideal, built up by a score of eloquent pens, still burns bright in our eyes. Her body was of alabaster, her legs of ivory; her hair was golden wire and her teeth pearls from the Orient. Music was in her voice and stateliness in her walk. She could love and sport and be faithless and yielding and cruel and true; but her emotions were simple, as befitted her person. Donne's poems reveal a lady of a very different cast. She was brown but she was also fair; she was solitary but also sociable; she was rustic yet also fond of city life; she was sceptical yet devout, emotional but reserved—in short she was as various and complex as Donne himself. As for choosing one type of human perfection

and restricting himself to love her and her only, how could Donne, or any man who allowed his senses full play and honestly recorded his own moods, so limit his nature and tell such lies to placate the conventional and the decorous? Was not 'love's sweetest part, Variety'? 'Of music, joy, life and eternity Change is the nursery', he sang. The timid fashion of the age might limit a lover to one woman. For his part he envied and admired the ancients, 'who held plurality of loves no crime':

But since this title honour hath been us'd,
Our weak credulity hath been abus'd.

We have fallen from our high estate; the golden laws of nature are repealed.

So through the glass of Donne's poetry, now darkly clouded, now brilliantly clear, we see pass in procession the many women whom he loved and hated—the common Julia whom he despised; the simpleton, to whom he taught the art of love; she who was married to an invalid husband, 'cag'd in a basket chair'; she who could only be loved dangerously by strategy; she who dreamt of him and saw him murdered as he crossed the Alps; she whom he had to dissuade from the risk of loving him; and lastly, the autumnal, the aristocratic lady for whom he felt more of reverence than of love—so they pass, common and rare, simple and sophisticated, young and old, noble and plebeian, and each casts a different spell and brings out a different lover, although the man is the same man, and the women, perhaps, are also phases of womanhood rather than separate and distinct women. In later years the Dean of St. Paul's would willingly have edited some of these poems and suppressed one of these lovers—the poet presumably of 'Going to Bed' and 'Love's Warr'. But the Dean would have been wrong. It is the union of so many different desires that gives Donne's love poetry not only its vitality but also a quality that is seldom found with such strength in the conventional and orthodox lover—its spirituality. If we do not love with the body, can we love with the mind? If we do not love variously, freely, admitting the lure first of this quality and then of that, can we at length choose out the one quality that is essential and adhere to it and so make peace among the warring elements and pass into a state of being which transcends the 'Hee

and Shee'? Even while he was at his most fickle and gave fullest scope to his youthful lusts, Donne could predict the season of maturity when he would love differently, with pain and difficulty, one and one only. Even while he scorned and railed and abused, he divined another relationship which transcended change and parting and might, even in the bodies' absence, lead to unity and communion:

Rend us in sunder, thou cans't not divide,
Our bodies so, but that our souls are ty'd,
And we can love by letters still and gifts,
And thoughts and dreams;

Again,

They who one another keepe alive
N'er parted be.

And again,

So to one neutrall thing both sexes fit,
Wee dye and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love.

Such hints and premonitions of a further and finer state urge him on and condemn him to perpetual unrest and dissatisfaction with the present. He is tantalized by the sense that there is a miracle beyond any of these transient delights and disgusts. Lovers can, if only for a short space, reach a state of unity beyond time, beyond sex, beyond the body. And at last, for one moment, they reach it. In the 'Extasie' they lie together on a bank,

All day, the same our postures were,
And wee said nothing, all the day. . . .

This Extasie doth unperplex
(We said) and tell us what we love,
Wee see by this, it was not sexe,
Wee see, we saw not what did move: . . .

Wee then, who are this new soule, know,
 Of what we are compos'd, and made,
 For, th'Atomies of which we grow,
 Are soules, whom no change can invade.
 But O alas, so long, so farre
 Our bodies why doe wee forbear? . . .

But O alas, he breaks off, and the words remind us that however much we may wish to keep Donne in one posture—for it is in these Extasies that lines of pure poetry suddenly flow as if liquefied by a great heat—so to remain in one posture was against his nature. Perhaps it is against the nature of things also. Donne snatches the intensity because he is aware of the change that must alter, of the discord that must interrupt.

Circumstances, at any rate, put it beyond his power to maintain that ecstasy for long. He had married secretly; he was a father; he was, as we are soon reminded, a very poor yet a very ambitious man, living in a damp little house at Mitcham with a family of small children. The children were frequently ill. They cried, and their cries, cutting through the thin walls of the jerry-built house, disturbed him at his work. He sought sanctuary naturally enough elsewhere, and naturally had to pay rent for that relief. Great ladies—Lady Bedford, Lady Huntingdon, Mrs. Herbert—with well-spread tables and fair gardens, must be conciliated; rich men with the gift of rooms in their possession must be placated. Thus, after Donne the harsh satirist, and Donne the imperious lover, comes the servile and obsequious figure of Donne the devout servant of the great, the extravagant eulogist of little girls. And our relationship with him suddenly changes. In the satires and the love poems there was a quality—some psychological intensity and complexity—that brings him closer than his contemporaries, who often seem to be caught up in a different world from ours and to exist immune from our perplexities and swept by passions which we admire but cannot feel. Easy as it is to exaggerate affinities, still we may claim to be akin to Donne in our readiness to admit contrasts, in our desire for openness, in that psychological intricacy which the novelists have taught us with their slow, subtle, and analytic prose. But now, as we follow Donne in his progress, he leaves us in the lurch. He becomes more remote, inaccessible, and obsolete than any of the

Elizabethans. It is as if the spirit of the age, which he had scorned and flouted, suddenly asserted itself and made this rebel its slave. And as we lose sight of the outspoken young man who hated society, and of the passionate lover, seeking some mysterious unity with his love and finding it miraculously, now here, now there, it is natural to abuse the system of patrons and patronage that thus seduced the most incorruptible of men. Yet it may be that we are too hasty. Every writer has an audience in view, and it may well be doubted if the Bedfords and the Drurys and the Herberts were worse influences than the libraries and the newspaper proprietors who fill the office of patron nowadays.

The comparison, it is true, presents great difficulties. The noble ladies who brought so strange an element into Donne's poetry, live only in the reflection, or in the distortion, that we find in the poems themselves. The age of memoirs and letter-writing was still to come. If they wrote themselves, and it is said that both Lady Pembroke and Lady Bedford were poets of merit, they did not dare to put their names to what they wrote, and it has vanished. But a diary here and there survives from which we may see the patroness more closely and less romantically. Lady Ann Clifford, for example, the daughter of a Clifford and a Russell, though active and practical and little educated—she was not allowed 'to learn any language because her father would not permit it'—felt, we can gather from the bald statements of her diary, a duty towards literature and to the makers of it as her mother, the patroness of the poet Daniel, had done before her. A great heiress, infected with all the passion of her age for lands and houses, busied with all the cares of wealth and property, she still read good English books as naturally as she ate good beef and mutton. She read *The Faery Queen* and Sidney's *Arcadia*; she acted in Ben Jonson's *Masques at Court*; and it is proof of the respect in which reading was held that a girl of fashion should be able to read an old corrupt poet like Chaucer without feeling that she was making herself a target for ridicule as a blue-stocking. The habit was part of a normal and well-bred life. It persisted even when she was mistress of one estate and claimant to even vaster possession of her own. She had Montaigne read aloud to her as she sat stitching at Knote; she sat absorbed in Chaucer while her husband worked. Later, when years of strife and loneliness had saddened her, she returned to her Chaucer with a deep

sigh of content: '... if I had not excellent Chaucer's book here to comfort me', she wrote, 'I were in a pitiable case having as many troubles as I have here, but, when I read in that, I scorn and make light of them all, and a little part of his beauteous spirit infuses itself in me'. The woman who said that, though she never attempted to set up a salon or to found a library, felt it incumbent on her to respect the men of low birth and no fortune who could write *The Canterbury Tales* or *The Faery Queen*. Donne preached before her at Knole. It was she who paid for the first monument to Spenser in Westminster Abbey, and if, when she raised a tomb to her old tutor, she dwelt largely upon her own virtues and titles, she still acknowledged that even so great a lady as herself owed gratitude to the makers of books. Words from great writers nailed to the walls of the room in which she sat, eternally transacting business, surrounded her as she worked, as they surrounded Montaigne in his tower in Burgundy.

Thus we may infer that Donne's relation to the Countess of Bedford was very different from any that could exist between a poet and a countess at the present time. There was something distant and ceremonious about it. To him she was 'as a vertuous Prince farre off'. The greatness of her office inspired reverence apart from her personality, just as the rewards within her gift inspired humility. He was her Laureate, and his songs in her praise were rewarded by invitations to stay with her at Twickenham and by those friendly meetings with men in power which were so effective in furthering the career of an ambitious man—and Donne was highly ambitious, not indeed for the fame of a poet, but for the power of a statesman. Thus when we read that Lady Bedford was 'God's Masterpiece', that she excelled all women in all ages, we realise that John Donne is not writing to Lucy Bedford; Poetry is saluting Rank. And this distance served to inspire reason rather than passion. Lady Bedford must have been a very clever woman, well versed in the finer shades of theology, to derive an instant or an intoxicating pleasure from the praises of her servant. Indeed, the extreme subtlety and erudition of Donne's poems to his patrons seems to show that one effect of writing for such an audience is to exaggerate the poet's ingenuity. What is not poetry but something tortured and difficult will prove to the patron that the poet is exerting his skill on her behalf. Then again, a learned poem can

be handed round among statesmen and men of affairs to prove that the poet is no mere versifier, but capable of office and responsibility. But a change of inspiration that has killed many poets—witness Tennyson and the *Idylls of the King*—only stimulated another side of Donne's many-sided nature and many-faceted brain. As we read the long poems written ostensibly in praise of Lady Bedford, or in celebration of Elizabeth Drury (*An Anatomie of the World* and the *Progresse of the Soul*), we are made to reflect how much remains for a poet to write about when the season of love is over. When May and June are passed, most poets cease to write or sing the songs of their youth out of tune. But Donne survived the perils of middle age by virtue of the acuteness and ardour of his intellect. When 'the satyrique fires which urg'd me to have writt in skorne of all' were quenched, when 'My muse (for I had one), because I'm cold, Divorced herself', there still remained the power to turn upon the nature of things and dissect that. Even in the passionate days of youth Donne had been a thinking poet. He had dissected and analysed his own love. To turn from that to the anatomy of the world, from the personal to the impersonal, was the natural development of a complex nature. And the new angle to which his mind now pointed under the influence of middle age and traffic with the world, released powers that were held in check when they were directed against some particular courtier or some particular woman. Now his imagination, as if freed from impediment, goes rocketing up in flights of extravagant exaggeration. True, the rocket bursts; it scatters in a shower of minute, separate particles—curious speculations, wire-drawn comparisons, obsolete crudition; but, winged by the double pressure of mind and heart, of reason and imagination, it soars far and fast into a finer air. Working himself up by his own extravagant praise of the dead girl, he shoots on:

We spur, we reine the starres, and in their race
 They're diversly content t'obey our pace.
 But keeps the earth her round proportion still?
 Doth not a Tenarif, or higher Hill
 Rise so high like a Rocke, that one might thinke
 The floating Moone would shipwracke there, and sinke?
 Seas are so deepe, that Whales being strooke to day,
 Perchance tomorrow, scarce at middle way

Of their wish'd journies end, the bottome, die.
And men, to sound depths, so much line untie,
As one might justly thinke, that there would rise
At end thereof, one of th'Antipodies:

Or again, Elizabeth Drury is dead and her soul has escaped:

she staves not in the ayre,

To looke what Meteors there themselves prepare;
She carries no desire to know, nor sense,
Whether th'ayres middle region be intense;
For th'Element of fire, she doth not know,
Whether she past by such a place or no;
She baits not at the Moone, nor cares to trie
Whether in that new world, men live, and die.
Venus retards her not, to'enquire, how shee
Can, (being one starre) *Hesper*, and *Vesper* bee;
Hee that charm'd *Argus* eyes, sweet *Mercury*,
Workes not on her, who now is growne all eye;

So we penetrate into distant regions, and reach rare and remote speculations a million miles removed from the simple girl whose death fired the explosion. But to break off fragments from poems whose virtue lies in their close-knit sinews and their long-breathed strength is to diminish them. They need to be read currently rather to grasp the energy and power of the whole than to admire those separate lines which Donne suddenly strikes to illumine the stages of our long climb.

Thus, finally, we reach the last section of the book, the Holy Sonnets and Divine Poems. Again the poetry changes with the change of circumstances and of years. The patron has gone with the need of patronage. Lady Bedford has been replaced by a Prince still more virtuous and still more remote. To Him the prosperous, the important, the famous Dean of St. Paul's now turns. But how different is the divine poetry of this great dignitary from the divine poetry of the Herberts and the Vaughans! The memory of his sins returns to him as he writes. He has been burnt with 'lust and envy'; he has followed profane loves; he has been scornful and fickle and passionate and servile and ambitious. He has attained his end; but he is weaker and worse than the horse or the bull. Now too he is

lonely. 'Since she whom I lov'd' is dead 'My good is dead.' Now at last his mind is 'wholly sett on heavenly things'. And yet how could Donne — that 'little world made cunningly of elements' — be wholly set on any one thing?

Oh, to vex me, contraries meet in one:
Inconstancy unnaturally hath begott
A constant habit; that when I would not
I change in vowes, and in devotione.

It was impossible for the poet who had noted so curiously the flow and change of human life, and its contrasts, who was at once so inquisitive of knowledge and so sceptical—

Doubt wisely; in strange way,
To stand inquiring right, is not to stray;
To sleep, or run wrong, is

— who had owned allegiance to so many great Princes, the body, the King, the Church of England, to reach that state of wholeness and certainty which poets of purer life were able to maintain. His devotions themselves were feverish and fitful. 'My devout fits come and goe away like a fantastique Ague.' They are full of contraries and agonies. Just as his love poetry at its most sensual will suddenly reveal the desire for a transcendent unity 'beyond the Hee and Shee', and his most reverential letters to great ladies will suddenly become love poems addressed by an amorous man to a woman of flesh and blood, so these last divine poems are poems of climbing and falling, of incongruous clamours and solemnities, as if the church door opened on the uproar of the street. That perhaps is why they still excite interest and disgust, contempt and admiration. For the Dean still retained the incorrigible curiosity of his youth. The temptation to speak the truth in defiance of the world even when he had taken all that the world had to give, still worked in him. An obstinate interest in the nature of his own sensations still troubled his age and broke its repose as it had troubled his youth and made him the most vigorous of satirists and the most passionate of lovers. There was no rest, no end, no solution even at the height of fame and on the edge of the grave for a nature plaited together

of such diverse strands. The famous preparations that he made, lying in his shroud, being carved for his tomb, when he felt death approach are poles asunder from the falling asleep of the tired and content. He must still cut a figure and still stand erect—a warning perhaps, a portent certainly, but always consciously and conspicuously himself. That, finally, is one of the reasons why we still seek out Donne; why after three hundred years and more we still hear the sound of his voice speaking across the ages so distinctly. It may be true that when from curiosity we come to cut up and ‘survey each part’, we are like the doctors and ‘know not why’—we cannot see how so many different qualities meet together in one man. But we have only to read him, to submit to the sound of that passionate and penetrating voice, and his figure rises again across the waste of the years more erect, more imperious, more inscrutable than any of his time. Even the elements seem to have respected that identity. When the fire of London destroyed almost every other monument in St. Paul’s, it left Donne’s figure untouched, as if the flames themselves found that knot too hard to undo, that riddle too difficult to read, and that figure too entirely itself to turn to common clay.

The Elizabethan Lumber Room

THESE magnificent volumes¹ are not often, perhaps, read through. Part of their charm consists in the fact that Hakluyt is not so much a book as a great bundle of commodities loosely tied together, an emporium, a lumber room strewn with ancient sacks, obsolete nautical instruments, huge bales of wool, and little bags of rubies and emeralds. One is for ever untying this packet here, sampling that heap over there, wiping the dust off some vast map of the world, and sitting down in semi-darkness to snuff the strange smells of silks and leathers and ambergris, while outside tumble the huge waves of the uncharted Elizabethan sea.

For this jumble of seeds, silks, unicorns' horns, elephants' teeth, wool, common stones, turbans, and bars of gold, these odds and ends of priceless value and complete worthlessness, were the fruit of innumerable voyages, traffics, and discoveries to unknown lands in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. The expeditions were manned by 'apt young men' from the West country, and financed in part by the great Queen herself. The ships, says Froude, were no bigger than modern yachts. There in the river by Greenwich the fleet lay gathered, close to the Palace. 'The Privy council looked out of the windows of the court . . . the ships thereupon discharge their ordnance . . . and the mariners they shouted in such sort that the sky rang again with the noise thereof.' Then, as the ships swung down the tide, one sailor after another walked the hatches, climbed the shrouds, stood upon the mainyards to wave his friends a last farewell. Many would come back no more. For directly England and the coast of France were beneath the horizon, the ships sailed into the unfamiliar; the air had its voices, the sea its lions and serpents, its evaporations of fire and tumultuous whirlpools. But God too was very close; the clouds but sparsely hid the divinity Himself; the limbs of Satan were almost visible. Familiarly the English sailors pitted their God against the God of the Turks, who 'can speake never a word for dulnes, much lesse can he helpe them in such an extremitie. . . . But howsoever their God behaved

¹ *Hakluyt's Collection of the Early Voyages, Travels, and Discoveries of the English Nation*, five volumes, 4to. 1810

himself, our God showed himself a Gód indeed. . . .’ God was as near by sea as by land, said Sir Humfrey Gilbert, riding through the storm. Suddenly one light disappeared; Sir Humfrey Gilbert had gone beneath the waves; when morning came, they sought his ship in vain. Sir Hugh Willoughby sailed to discover the North-West Passage and made no return. The Earl of Cumberland’s men, hung up by adverse winds off the coast of Cornwall for a fortnight, licked the muddy water off the deck in agony. And sometimes a ragged and worn-out man came knocking at the door of an English country house and claimed to be the boy who had left it years ago to sail the seas. ‘Sir William his father, and my lady his mother knew him not to be their son, until they found a secret mark, which was a wart upon one of his knees.’ But he had with him a black stone, veined with gold, or an ivory tusk, or a silver ingot, and urged on the village youth with talk of gold strewn over the land as stones are strewn in the fields of England. One expedition might fail, but what if the passage to the fabled land of uncounted riches lay only a little farther up the coast? What if the known world was only the prelude to some more splendid panorama? When, after the long voyage, the ships dropped anchor in the great river of the Plate and the men went exploring through the undulating lands, startling grazing herds of deer, seeing the limbs of savages between the trees, they filled their pockets with pebbles that might be emeralds or sand that might be gold; or sometimes, rounding a headland, they saw, far off, a string of savages slowly descending to the beach bearing on their heads and linking their shoulders together with heavy burdens for the Spanish King.

These are the fine stories used effectively all through the West country to decoy ‘the apt young men’ lounging by the harbour-side to leave their nets and fish for gold. But the voyagers were sober merchants into the bargain, citizens with the good of English trade and the welfare of English work-people at heart. The captains are reminded how necessary it is to find a market abroad for English wool; to discover the herb from which blue dyes are made; above all to make inquiry as to the methods of producing oil, since all attempts to make it from radish seed have failed. They are reminded of the misery of the English poor, whose crimes, brought about by poverty, make them ‘daily consumed by the gallows’.

They are reminded how the soil of England had been enriched by the discoveries of travellers in the past; how Dr. Linaker brought seeds of the damask rose and tulipas, and how beasts and plants and herbs, 'without which our life were to be said barbarous', have all come to England gradually from abroad. In search of markets and of goods, of the immortal fame success would bring them, the apt young men set sail for the North, and were left, a little company of isolated Englishmen surrounded by snow and the huts of savages, to make what bargains they could and pick up what knowledge they might before the ships returned in the summer to fetch them home again. There they endured, an isolated company, burning on the rim of the dark. One of them, carrying a charter from his company in London, went inland as far as Moscow, and there saw the Emperor 'sitting in his chair of estate with his crown on his head, and a staff of goldsmiths' work in his left hand'. All the ceremony that he saw is carefully written out, and the sight upon which the English merchant first set eyes has the brilliancy of a Roman vase dug up and stood for a moment in the sun, until, exposed to the air, seen by millions of eyes, it dulls and crumbles away. There, all these centuries, on the outskirts of the world, the glories of Moscow, the glories of Constantinople have flowered unseen. The Englishman was bravely dressed for the occasion, led 'three fair mastiffs in coats of red cloth', and carried a letter from Elizabeth 'the paper whereof did smell most fragrantly of camphor and ambergris, and the ink of perfect musk'. And sometimes, since trophies from the amazing new world were eagerly awaited at home, together with unicorns' horns and lumps of ambergris and the fine stories of the engendering of whales and 'debates' of elephants and dragons whose blood, mixed, congealed into vermillion, a living sample would be sent, a live savage caught somewhere off the coast of Labrador, taken to England, and shown about like a wild beast. Next year they brought him back, and took a woman savage on board to keep him company. When they saw each other they blushed; they blushed profoundly, but the sailors, though they noted it, knew not why. Later the two savages set up house together on board ship, she attending to his wants, he nursing her in sickness. But, as the sailors noted again, the savages lived together in perfect chastity.

All this, the new words, the new ideas, the waves, the savages,

the adventures, found their way naturally into the plays which were being acted on the banks of the Thames. There was an audience quick to seize upon the coloured and the high-sounding; to associate those

frigates bottom'd with rich Sethin planks,
Topt with the lofty firs of Lebanon,

with the adventures of their own sons and brothers abroad. The Verneys, for example, had a wild boy who had gone as pirate, turned Turk, and died out there, sending back to Claydon to be kept as relics of him some silk, a turban, and a pilgrim's staff. A gulf lay between the spartan domestic housecraft of the Paston women and the refined tastes of the Elizabethan Court ladies, who, grown old, says Harrison, spent their time reading histories, or 'writing volumes of their own, or translating of other men's into our English and Latin tongue', while the younger ladies played the lute and the citharne and spent their leisure in the enjoyment of music. Thus, with singing and with music, springs into existence the characteristic Elizabethan extravagance; the dolphins and lavoltas of Greene; the hyperbole, more surprising in a writer so terse and muscular, of Ben Jonson. Thus we find the whole of Elizabethan literature strewn with gold and silver; with talk of Guiana's rarities, and references to that America—'O my America! my new-found-land'—which was not merely a land on the map, but symbolized the unknown territories of the soul. So, over the water, the imagination of Montaigne brooded in fascination upon savages, cannibals, society, and government.

But the mention of Montaigne suggests that though the influence of the sea and the voyages, of the lumber room crammed with sea beasts and horns and ivory and old maps and nautical instruments, helped to inspire the greatest age of English poetry, its effects were by no means so beneficial upon English prose. Rhyme and metre helped the poets to keep the tumult of their perceptions in order. But the prose writer, without these restrictions, accumulated clauses, petered out in interminable catalogues, tripped and stumbled over the convolutions of his own rich draperies. How little Elizabethan prose was fit for its office, how exquisitely French prose was already adapted, can be seen by comparing a passage from Sidney's *Defense of Poesie* with one from Montaigne's *Essays*.

He beginneth not with obscure definitions, which must blur the margin with interpretations, and load the memory with doubtfulness: but he cometh to you with words set in delightful proportion, either accompanied with, or prepared for the well enchanting Skill of Music, and with a tale (forsooth) he cometh unto you, with a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the Chimney corner; and pretending no more, doth intend the winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue; even as the child is often brought to take most wholesome things by hiding them in such other as have a pleasant taste: which if one should begin to tell them the nature of the *Aloës* or *Rhubarbarum* they should receive, would sooner take their physic at their ears than at their mouth, so is it in men (most of which are childish in the best things, till they be cradled in their graves) glad they will be to hear the tales of Hercules. . . .

And so it runs on for seventy-six words more. Sidney's prose is an uninterrupted monologue, with sudden flashes of felicity and splendid phrases, which lends itself to lamentations and moralities, to long accumulations and catalogues, but is never quick, never colloquial, unable to grasp a thought closely and firmly, or to adapt itself flexibly and exactly to the chops and changes of the mind. Compared with this, Montaigne is master of an instrument which knows its own powers and limitations, and is capable of insinuating itself into crannies and crevices which poetry can never reach; capable of cadences different but no less beautiful; of subtleties and intensities which Elizabethan prose entirely ignores. He is considering the way in which certain of the ancients met death:

. . . ils l'ont faicte couler et glisser parmy la lascheté de leurs occupations accoustumées entre des garses et bons compaignons; nul propos de consolation, nulle mention de testament, nulle affectation ambitieuse de constance, nul discours de leur condition future; mais entre les jeux, les festins, facécies, entretiens communs et populaires, et la musique, et des vers amoureux.

An age seems to separate Sidney from Montaigne. The English compared with the French are as boys compared with men.

But the Elizabethan prose writers, if they have the formlessness of youth, have, too, its freshness and audacity. In the same essay Sidney shapes language, masterfully and easily, to his liking; freely

and naturally reaches his hand for a metaphor. To bring this prose to perfection (and Dryden's prose is very near perfection) only the discipline of the stage was necessary and the growth of self-consciousness. It is in the plays, and especially in the comic passages of the plays, that the finest Elizabethan prose is to be found. The stage was the nursery where prose learnt to find its feet. For on the stage people had to meet, to quip and crank, to suffer interruptions, to talk of ordinary things.

Cler. A pox of her autumnal face, her pieced beauty! there's no man can be admitted till she be ready now-a-days, till she has painted, and perfumed, and washed, and scoured, but the boy here; and him she wipes her oiled lips upon, like a sponge. I have made a song (I pray thee hear it) on the subject.

[Page *sings*.

Still to be neat, still to be drest, &c.

True. And I am clearly on the other side: I love a good dressing before any beauty o' the world. O, a woman is then like a delicate garden; nor is there one kind of it; she may vary every hour; take often counsel of her glass, and choose the best. If she have good ears, show them; good hair, lay it out; good legs, wear short clothes; a good hand, discover it often: practise any art to mend breath, cleanse teeth, repair eyebrows; paint and profess it.

So the talk runs in Ben Jonson's *Silent Woman*, knocked into shape by interruptions, sharpened by collisions, and never allowed to settle into stagnancy or swell into turbidity. But the publicity of the stage and the perpetual presence of a second person were hostile to that growing consciousness of one's self, that brooding in solitude over the mysteries of the soul, which, as the years went by, sought expression and found a champion in the sublime genius of Sir Thomas Browne. His immense egotism has paved the way for all psychological novelists, autobiographers, confession-mongers, and dealers in the curious shades of our private life. He it was who first turned from the contacts of men with men to their lonely life within. 'The world that I regard is myself; it is the microcosm of my own frame that I cast mine eye on; for the other I use it but like my globe, and turn it round sometimes for my recreation.' All was mystery and darkness as the first explorer walked the catacombs

swinging his lanthorn. 'I feel sometimes a hell within myself; Lucifer keeps his court in my breast; Legion is revived in me.' In these solitudes there were no guides and no companions. 'I am in the dark to all the world, and my nearest friends behold me but in a cloud.' The strangest thoughts and imaginings have play with him as he goes about his work, outwardly the most sober of mankind and esteemed the greatest physician in Norwich. He has wished for death. He has doubted all things. What if we are asleep in this world and the conceits of life are as mere dreams? The tavern music, the Ave Mary bell, the broken pot that the workman has dug out of the field—at the sight and sound of them he stops dead, as if transfixed by the astonishing vista that opens before his imagination. 'We carry with us the wonders we seek without us; there is all Africa and her prodigies in us.' A halo of wonder encircles everything that he sees; he turns his light gradually upon the flowers and insects and grasses at his feet so as to disturb nothing in the mysterious processes of their existence. With the same awe, mixed with a sublime complacency, he records the discovery of his own qualities and attainments. He was charitable and brave and averse from nothing. He was full of feeling for others and merciless upon himself. 'For my conversation, it is like the sun's, with all men, and with a friendly aspect to good and bad.' He knows six languages, the laws, the customs and policies of several states, the names of all the constellations and most of the plants of his country, and yet, so sweeping is his imagination, so large the horizon in which he sees this little figure walking that 'methinks I do not know so many as when I did but know a hundred, and had scarcely ever simplified further than Cheapside'.

He is the first of the autobiographers. Swooping and soaring at the highest altitudes, he stoops suddenly with loving particularity upon the details of his own body. His height was moderate, he tells us, his eyes large and luminous; his skin dark but constantly suffused with blushes. He dressed very plainly. He seldom laughed. He collected coins, kept maggots in boxes, dissected the lungs of frogs, braved the stench of the spermaceti whale, tolerated Jews, had a good word for the deformity of the toad, and combined a scientific and sceptical attitude towards most things with an unfortunate belief in witches. In short, as we say when we cannot help laughing at the oddities of people we admire most, he was a

character, and the first to make us feel that the most sublime speculations of the human imagination are issued from a particular man, whom we can love. In the midst of the solemnities of the Urn Burial we smile when he remarks that afflictions induce callosities. The smile broadens to laughter as we mouth out the splendid pomposities, the astonishing conjectures of the *Religio Medici*. Whatever he writes is stamped with his own idiosyncrasy, and we first become conscious of impurities which hereafter stain literature with so many freakish colours that, however hard we try, it is difficult to be certain whether we are looking at a man or his writing. Now we are in the presence of sublime imagination; now rambling through one of the finest lumber rooms in the world—a chamber stuffed from floor to ceiling with ivory, old iron, broken pots, urns, unicorns' horns, and magic glasses full of emerald lights and blue mystery.

Notes on an Elizabethan Play

THERE are, it must be admitted, some highly formidable tracts in English literature, and chief among them that jungle, forest, and wilderness which is the Elizabethan drama. For many reasons, not here to be examined, Shakespeare stands out, Shakespeare who has had the light on him from his day to ours, Shakespeare who towers highest when looked at from the level of his own contemporaries. But the plays of the lesser Elizabethans—Greene, Dekker, Peele, Chapman, Beaumont and Fletcher, - to adventure into that wilderness is for the ordinary reader an ordeal, an upsetting experience which plys him with questions, harries him with doubts, alternately delights and vexes him with pleasures and pains. For we are apt to forget, reading, as we tend to do, only the masterpieces of a bygone age, how great a power the body of a literature possesses to impose itself: how it will not suffer itself to be read passively, but takes us and reads us; flouts our preconceptions; questions principles which we had got into the habit of taking for granted, and, in fact, splits us into two parts as we read, making us, even as we enjoy, yield our ground or stick to our guns.

At the outset in reading an Elizabethan play we are overcome by the extraordinary discrepancy between the Elizabethan view of reality and our own. The reality to which we have grown accustomed is, speaking roughly, based upon the life and death of some knight called Smith, who succeeded his father in the family business of pitwood importers, timber merchants and coal exporters, was well known in political, temperance, and church circles, did much for the poor of Liverpool, and died last Wednesday of pneumonia while on a visit to his son at Muswell Hill. That is the world we know. That is the reality which our poets and novelists have to expound and illuminate. Then we open the first Elizabethan play that comes to hand and read how

I once did see
In my young travels through Armenia
An angry unicorn in his full career
Charge with too swift a foot a jeweller
That watch'd him for the treasure of his brow,
And ere he could get shelter of a tree
Nail him with his rich antlers to the earth.

Where is Smith, we ask, where is Liverpool? And the groves of Elizabethan drama echo 'Where?' Exquisite is the delight, sublime the relief of being set free to wander in the land of the unicorn and the jeweller among dukes and grandees, Gonzaloes and Bellimperias, who spend their lives in murder and intrigue, dress up as men if they are women, as women if they are men, see ghosts, run mad, and diet in the greatest profusion on the slightest provocation, uttering as they fall imprecations of superb vigour or elegies of the wildest despair. But soon the low, the relentless voice, which if we wish to identify it we must suppose typical of a reader fed on modern English literature, and French and Russian, asks why, then, with all this to stimulate and enchant, these old plays are for long stretches of time so intolerably dull? Is it not that literature, if it is to keep us on the alert through five acts or thirty-two chapters, must somehow be based on Smith, have one toe touching Liverpool, take off into whatever heights it pleases from reality? We are not so purblind as to suppose that a man because his name is Smith and he lives at Liverpool is therefore 'real'. We know indeed that this reality is a chameleon quality, the fantastic becoming as we grow used to it often the closest to the truth, the sober the furthest from it, and nothing proving a writer's greatness more than his capacity to consolidate his scene by the use of what, until he touched them, seemed wisps of cloud and threads of gossamer. Our contention merely is that there is a station, somewhere in mid-air, whence Smith and Liverpool can be seen to the best advantage; that the great artist is the man who knows where to place himself above the shifting scenery; that while he never loses sight of Liverpool he never sees it in the wrong perspective. The Elizabethans bore us, then, because their Smiths are all changed to dukes, their Liverpools to fabulous islands and palaces in Genoa. Instead of keeping a proper poise above life they soar miles into the empyrean, where nothing is visible for long hours at a time but clouds at their revelry, and a cloud landscape is not ultimately satisfactory to human eyes. The Elizabethans bore us because they suffocate our imaginations rather than set them to work.

Still, though potent enough, the boredom of an Elizabethan play is of a different quality altogether from the boredom which a nineteenth-century play, a Tennyson or a Henry Taylor play,

inflicts. The riot of images, the violent volubility of language, all that cloy and satiates in the Elizabethans yet appears to be drawn up with a roar as a feeble fire is sucked up by a newspaper. There is, even in the worst, an intermittent bawling vigour which gives us the sense in our quiet arm-chairs of ostlers and orange-girls catching up the lines, flinging them back, hissing or stamping applause. But the deliberate drama of the Victorian age is evidently written in a study. It has for audience ticking clocks and rows of classics bound in half morocco. There is no stamping, no applause. It does not, as, with all its faults, the Elizabethan audience did, leaven the mass with fire. Rhetorical and bombastic, the lines are flung and hurried into existence and reach the same impromptu felicities, have the same lip-moulded profusion and unexpectedness, which speech sometimes achieves, but seldom in our day the deliberate, solitary pen. Indeed, half the work of the dramatists, one feels, was done in the Elizabethan age by the public.

Against that, however, is to be set the fact that the influence of the public was in many respects detestable. To its door we must lay the greatest infliction that Elizabethan drama puts upon us—the plot; the incessant, improbable, almost unintelligible convolutions which presumably gratified the spirit of an excitable and unlettered public actually in the playhouse, but only confuse and fatigue a reader with the book before him. Undoubtedly something must happen; undoubtedly a play where nothing happens is an impossibility. But we have a right to demand (since the Greeks have proved that it is perfectly possible) that what happens shall have an end in view. It shall agitate great emotions; bring into existence memorable scenes; stir the actors to say what could not be said without this stimulus. Nobody can fail to remember the plot of the *Antigone*, because what happens is so closely bound up with the emotions of the actors that we remember the people and the plot at one and the same time. But who can tell us what happens in the *White Devil*, or the *Maid's Tragedy*, except by remembering the story apart from the emotions which it has aroused? As for the lesser Elizabethans, like Greene and Kyd, the complexities of their plots are so great, and the violence which those plots demand so terrific, that the actors themselves are obliterated and emotions which, according to our convention at least, deserve the most careful investigation, the most delicate analysis, are clean sponged

off the slate. And the result is inevitable. Outside Shakespeare and perhaps Ben Jonson, there are no characters in Elizabethan drama, only violences whom we know so little that we can scarcely care what becomes of them. Take any hero or heroine in those early plays—Bellimperia in the *Spanish Tragedy* will serve as well as another—and can we honestly say that we care a jot for the unfortunate lady who runs the whole gamut of human misery to kill herself in the end? No more than for an animated broomstick, we must reply, and in a work dealing with men and women the prevalence of broomsticks is a drawback. But the *Spanish Tragedy* is admittedly a crude forerunner, chiefly valuable because such primitive efforts lay bare the formidable framework which greater dramatists could modify, but had to use. Ford, it is claimed, is of the school of Stendhal and of Flaubert; Ford is a psychologist. Ford is an analyst. 'This man', says Mr. Havelock Ellis, 'writes of women not as a dramatist nor as a lover, but as one who has searched intimately and felt with instinctive sympathy the fibres of their hearts.'

The play—'*Tis pity she's a Whore*—upon which this judgement is chiefly based shows us the whole nature of Annabella spun from pole to pole in a series of tremendous vicissitudes. First, her brother tells her that he loves her; next she confesses her love for him; next finds herself with child by him; next forces herself to marry Soranzo; next is discovered; next repents; finally is killed, and it is her lover and brother who kills her. To trace the trail of feelings which such crises and calamities might be expected to breed in a woman of ordinary sensibility might have filled volumes. A dramatist, of course, has no volumes to fill. He is forced to contract. Even so, he can illumine; he can reveal enough for us to guess the rest. But what is it that we know without using microscopes and splitting hairs about the character of Annabella? Gropingly we make out that she is a spirited girl, with her defiance of her husband when he abuses her, her snatches of Italian song, her ready wit, her simple glad love-making. But of character as we understand the word there is no trace. We do not know how she reaches her conclusions, only that she has reached them. Nobody describes her. She is always at the height of her passion, never at its approach. Compare her with Anna Karenina. The Russian woman is flesh and blood, nerves and temperament, has heart, brain, body and mind where the English girl is flat and crude as a face painted on a playing card; she is with-

out depth, without range, without intricacy. But as we say this we know that we have missed something. We have let the meaning of the play slip through our hands. We have ignored the emotion which has been accumulating because it has accumulated in places where we have not expected to find it. We have been comparing the play with prose, and the play, after all, is poetry.

The play is poetry, we say, and the novel prose. Let us attempt to obliterate detail, and place the two before us side by side, feeling, so far as we can, the angles and edges of each, recalling each, so far as we are able, as a whole. Then, at once, the prime differences emerge; the long leisurely accumulated novel; the little contracted play; the emotion all split up, dissipated and then woven together slowly and gradually massed into a whole, in the novel; the emotion concentrated, generalized, heightened in the play. What moments of intensity, what phrases of astonishing beauty the play shot at us!

O, my lords,
I but deceived your eyes with antic gesture,
When one news straight came huddling on another
Of death! and death! and death! still I danced forward.

or

You have oft for these two lips
Neglected cassia or the natural sweets
Of the spring-violet: they are not yet much wither'd.

With all her reality, Anna Karenina could never say

‘You have oft for these two lips
Neglected cassia’.

Some of the most profound of human emotions are therefore beyond her reach. The extremes of passion are not for the novelist; the perfect marriages of sense and sound are not for him; he must tame his swiftness to sluggardry; keep his eyes on the ground, not on the sky: suggest by description, not reveal by illumination. Instead of singing.

Lay a garland on my hearse
Of the dismal yew;
Maidens, willow branches bear;
Say I died true,

he must enumerate the chrysanthemums fading on the grave and the undertakers' men snuffing past in their four-wheelers. How then can we compare this lumbering and lagging art with poetry? Granted all the little dexterities by which the novelist makes us know the individual and recognize the real, the dramatist goes beyond the single and the separate, shows us not Annabella in love, but love itself; not Anna Karenina throwing herself under the train, but ruin and death and the

... soul, like a ship in a black storm,
 ... driven, I know not whither.

So with pardonable impatience we might exclaim as we shut our Elizabethan play. But what then is the exclamation with which we close *War and Peace*? Not one of disappointment; we are not left lamenting the superficiality, upbraiding the triviality of the novelist's art. Rather we are made more than ever aware of the inexhaustible richness of human sensibility. Here, in the play, we recognize the general; here, in the novel, the particular. Here we gather all our energies into a bunch and spring. Here we extend and expand and let come slowly in from all quarters deliberate impressions, accumulated messages. The mind is so saturated with sensibility, language so inadequate to its experience, that, far from ruling off one form of literature or decreeing its inferiority to others, we complain that they are still unable to keep pace with the wealth of material, and wait impatiently the creation of what may yet be devised to liberate us of the enormous burden of the unexpressed.

Thus, in spite of dullness, bombast, rhetoric, and confusion, we still read the lesser Elizabethans, still find ourselves adventuring in the land of the jeweller and the unicorn. The familiar factories of Liverpool fade into thin air and we scarcely recognize any likeness between the knight who imported timber and died of pneumonia at Muswell Hill and the Armenian Duke who fell like a Roman on his sword while the owl shrieked in the ivy and the Duchess gave birth to a still-born babe 'mongst women howling. To join those territories and recognize the same man in different disguises we have to adjust and revise. But make the necessary alterations in perspective, draw in those filaments of sensibility which the moderns have so marvellously developed, use instead the

ear and the eye which the moderns have so basely starved, hear words as they are laughed and shouted, not as they are printed in black letters on the page, see before your eyes the changing faces and living bodies of men and women—put yourself, in short, into a different but not more elementary stage of your reading development and then the true merits of Elizabethan drama will assert themselves. The power of the whole is undeniable. Theirs, too, is the word-coining genius, as if thought plunged into a sea of words and came up dripping. Theirs is that broad humour based upon the nakedness of the body, which, however arduously the the public-spirited may try, is impossible since the body is draped. Then at the back of this, imposing not unity but some sort of stability, is what we may briefly call a sense of the presence of the Gods. He would be a bold critic who should attempt to impose any creed upon the swarm and variety of the Elizabethan dramatists, and yet it implies some timidity if we take it for granted that a whole literature with common characteristics is a mere evaporation of high spirits, a money-making enterprise, a fluke of the mind which, owing to favourable circumstances, came off successfully. Even in the jungle and the wilderness the compass still points.

‘Lord, Lord, that I were dead!’

they are for ever crying.

O thou soft natural death that art joint-twin
To sweetest slumber—

The pageant of the world is marvellous, but the pageant of the world is vanity.

glories
Of human greatness are but pleasing dreams
And shadows soon decaying: on the stage
Of my mortality my youth hath acted
Some scenes of vanity——

To die and be quit of it all is their desire; the bell that tolls throughout the drama is death and disenchantment.

All life is but a wandering to find home,
When we’re gone, we’re there.

Ruin, weariness, death, perpetually death, stand grimly to confront the other presence of Elizabethan drama which is life: life compact of frigates, fir trees and ivory, of dolphins and the juice of July flowers, of the milk of unicorns and panthers' breath, of ropes of pearl, brains of peacocks and Cretan wine. To this, life at its most reckless and abundant, they reply

Man is a tree that hath no top in cares,
No root in comforts; all his power to live
Is given to no end but t'have power to grieve.

It is this echo flung back and back from the other side of the play which, if it has not the name, still has the effect of the presence of the Gods. So we ramble through the jungle, forest, and wilderness of Elizabethan drama. So we consort with Emperors and clowns, jewellers and unicorns, and laugh and exult and marvel at the splendour and humour and fantasy of it all. A noble rage consumes us when the curtain falls; we are bored too, and nauseated by the wearisome old tricks and florid bombast. A dozen deaths of full-grown men and women move us less than the suffering of one of Tolstoy's flies. Wandering in the maze of the impossible and tedious story suddenly some passionate intensity seizes us; some sublimity exalts, or some melodious snatch of song enchants. It is a world full of tedium and delight, pleasure and curiosity, of extravagant laughter, poetry, and splendour. But gradually it comes over us, what then are we being denied? What is it that we are coming to want so persistently, that unless we get it instantly we must seek elsewhere? It is solitude. There is no privacy here. Always the door opens and someone comes in. All is shared, made visible, audible, dramatic. Meanwhile, as if tired with company, the mind steals off to muse in solitude; to think, not to act; to comment, not to share; to explore its own darkness, not the bright-lit-up surfaces of others. It turns to Donne, to Montaigne, to Sir Thomas Browne, to the keepers of the keys of solitude.

Defoe¹

THE fear which attacks the recorder of centenaries lest he should find himself measuring a diminishing spectre and forced to foretell its approaching dissolution is not only absent in the case of *Robinson Crusoe* but the mere thought of it is ridiculous. It may be true that *Robinson Crusoe* is two hundred years of age upon the twenty-fifth of April 1919, but far from raising the familiar speculations as to whether people now read it and will continue to read it, the effect of the bi-centenary is to make us marvel that *Robinson Crusoe*, the perennial and immortal, should have been in existence so short a time as that. The book resembles one of the anonymous productions of the race rather than the effort of a single mind; and as for celebrating its centenary we should as soon think of celebrating the centenaries of Stonehenge itself. Something of this we may attribute to the fact that we have all had *Robinson Crusoe* read aloud to us as children, and were thus much in the same state in mind towards Defoe and his story that the Greeks were in towards Homer. It never occurred to us that there was such a person as Defoe, and to have been told that *Robinson Crusoe* was the work of a man with a pen in his hand would either have disturbed us unpleasantly or meant nothing at all. The impressions of childhood are those that last longest and cut deepest. It still seems that the name of Daniel Defoe has no right to appear upon the title-page of *Robinson Crusoe*, and if we celebrate the bi-centenary of the book we are making a slightly unnecessary allusion to the fact that, like Stonehenge, it is still in existence.

The great fame of the book has done its author some injustice; for while it has given him a kind of anonymous glory it has obscured the fact that he was a writer of other works which, it is safe to assert, were not read aloud to us as children. Thus when the Editor of the *Christian World* in the year 1870 appealed to 'the boys and girls of England' to erect a monument upon the grave of Defoe, which a stroke of lightning had mutilated, the marble was inscribed to the memory of the author of *Robinson Crusoe*. No

¹ Written in 1919

mention was made of *Moll Flanders*. Considering the topics which are dealt with in that book, and in *Roxana*, *Captain Singleton*, *Colonel Jack* and the rest, we need not be surprised, though we may be indignant, at the omission. We may agree with Mr. Wright, the biographer of Defoe, that these 'are not works for the drawing-room table'. But unless we consent to make that useful piece of furniture the final arbiter of taste, we must deplore the fact that their superficial coarseness, or the universal celebrity of *Robinson Crusoe*, has led them to be far less widely famed than they deserve. On any monument worthy of the name of monument the names of *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*, at least, should be carved as deeply as the name of Defoe. They stand among the few English novels which we can call indisputably great. The occasion of the bi-centenary of their more famous companion may well lead us to consider in what their greatness, which has so much in common with his, may be found to consist.

Defoe was an elderly man when he turned novelist, many years the predecessor of Richardson and Fielding, and one of the first indeed to shape the novel and launch it on its way. But it is unnecessary to labour the fact of his precedence, except that he came to his novel-writing with certain conceptions about the art which he derived partly from being himself one of the first to practise it. The novel had to justify its existence by telling a true story and preaching a sound moral. 'This supplying a story by invention is certainly a most scandalous crime', he wrote. 'It is a sort of lying that makes a great hole in the heart, in which by degrees a habit of lying enters in.' Either in the preface or in the text of each of his works, therefore, he takes pains to insist that he has not used his invention at all but has depended upon facts, and that his purpose has been the highly moral desire to convert the vicious or to warn the innocent. Happily these were principles that tallied very well with his natural disposition and endowments. Facts had been drilled into him by sixty years of varying fortunes before he turned his experience to account in fiction. 'I have some time ago summed up the Scenes of my life in this distich', he wrote:

No man has tasted differing fortunes more,
And thirteen times I have been rich and poor.

He had spent eighteen months in Newgate and talked with thieves,

pirates, highwaymen, and coiners before he wrote the history of Moll Flanders. But to have facts thrust upon you by dint of living and accident is one thing; to swallow them voraciously and retain the imprint of them indelibly, is another. It is not merely that Defoe knew the stress of poverty and had talked with the victims of it, but that the unsheltered life, exposed to circumstances and forced to shift for itself, appealed to him imaginatively as the right matter for his art. In the first pages of each of his great novels he reduces his hero or heroine to such a state of unfriended misery that their existence must be a continued struggle, and their survival at all the result of luck and their own exertions. Moll Flanders was born in Newgate of a criminal mother; Captain Singleton was stolen as a child and sold to the gipsies; Colonel Jack, though 'born a gentleman, was put 'prentice to a pickpocket'; Roxana starts under better auspices, but, having married at fifteen, she sees her husband go bankrupt and is left with five children in 'a condition the most deplorable that words can express'.

Thus each of these boys and girls has the world to begin and the battle to fight for himself. The situation thus created was entirely to Defoe's liking. From her very birth or with half a year's respite at most, Moll Flanders, the most notable of them, is goaded by 'that worst of devils, poverty', forced to earn her living as soon as she can sew, driven from place to place, making no demands upon her creator for the subtle domestic atmosphere which he was unable to supply, but drawing upon him for all he knew of strange people and customs. From the outset the burden of proving her right to exist is laid upon her. She has to depend entirely upon her own wits and judgement, and to deal with each emergency as it arises by a rule-of-thumb morality which she has forged in her own head. The briskness of the story is due partly to the fact that having transgressed the accepted laws at a very early age she has henceforth the freedom of the outcast. The one impossible event is that she should settle down in comfort and security. But from the first the peculiar genius of the author asserts itself, and avoids the obvious danger of the novel of adventure. He makes us understand that Moll Flanders was a woman on her own account and not only material for a succession of adventures. In proof of this she begins, as Roxana also begins, by falling passionately, if unfortunately, in love. That she must rouse herself and marry someone else and look very closely to

her settlements and prospects is no slight upon her passion, but to be laid to the charge of her birth; and, like all Defoe's women, she is a person of robust understanding. Since she makes no scruple of telling lies when they serve her purpose, there is something undeniable about her truth when she speaks it. She has no time to waste upon the refinements of personal affection; one tear is dropped, one moment of despair allowed, and then 'on with the story'. She has a spirit that loves to breast the storm. She delights in the exercise of her own powers. When she discovers that the man she has married in Virginia is her own brother she is violently disgusted; she insists upon leaving him; but as soon as she sets foot in Bristol, 'I took the diversion of going to Bath, for as I was still far from being old so my humour, which was always gay, continued so to an extreme'. Heartless she is not, nor can anyone charge her with levity; but life delights her, and a heroine who lives has us all in tow. Moreover, her ambition has that slight strain of imagination in it which puts it in the category of the noble passions. Shrewd and practical of necessity, she is yet haunted by a desire for romance and for the quality which to her perception makes a man a gentleman. 'It was really a true gallant spirit he was of, and it was the more grievous to me. 'Tis something of relief even to be undone by a man of honour rather than by a scoundrel', she writes when she had misled a highwayman as to the extent of her fortune. It is in keeping with this temper that she should be proud of her final partner because he refuses to work when they reach the plantations but prefers hunting, and that she should take pleasure in buying him wigs and silver-hilted swords 'to make him appear, as he really was, a very fine gentleman'. Her very love of hot weather is in keeping, and the passion with which she kissed the ground that her son had trod on, and her noble tolerance of every kind of fault so long as it is not 'complete baseness of spirit, imperious, cruel, and relentless when uppermost, abject and low-spirited when down'. For the rest of the world she has nothing but goodwill.

Since the list of the qualities and graces of this seasoned old sinner is by no means exhausted we can well understand how it was that Borrow's apple-woman on London Bridge called her 'blessed Mary' and valued her book above all the apples on her stall; and that Borrow, taking the book deep into the booth, read till his eyes ached. But we dwell upon such signs of character only

by way of proof that the creator of *Moll Flanders* was not, as he has been accused of being, a mere journalist and literal recorder of facts with no conception of the nature of psychology. It is true that his characters take shape and substance of their own accord, as if in despite of the author and not altogether to his liking. He never lingers or stresses any point of subtlety or pathos, but presses on imperturbably as if they came there without his knowledge. A touch of imagination, such as that when the Prince sits by his son's cradle and Roxana observes how 'he loved to look at it when it was asleep', seems to mean much more to us than to him. After the curiously modern dissertation upon the need of communicating matters of importance to a second person lest, like the thief in Newgate, we should talk of it in our sleep, he apologizes for his digression. He seems to have taken his characters so deeply into his mind that he lived them without exactly knowing how; and, like all unconscious artists, he leaves more gold in his work than his own generation was able to bring to the surface.

The interpretation that we put on his characters might therefore well have puzzled him. We find for ourselves meanings which he was careful to disguise even from his own eye. Thus it comes about that we admire *Moll Flanders* far more than we blame her. Nor can we believe that Defoe had made up his mind as to the precise degree of her guilt, or was unaware that in considering the lives of the abandoned he raised many deep questions and hinted, if he did not state, answers quite at variance with his professions of belief. From the evidence supplied by his essay upon the 'Education of Women' we know that he had thought deeply and much more in advance of his age upon the capacities of women, which he rated very high, and the injustice done to them, which he rated very harsh.

I have often thought of it as one of the most barbarous customs in the world, considering us as a civilized and a Christian country, that we deny the advantages of learning to women. We reproach the sex every day with folly and impertinence; which I am confident, had they the advantages of education equal to us, they would be guilty of less than ourselves.

The advocates of women's rights would hardly care, perhaps, to claim *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* among their patron saints;

and yet it is clear that Defoe not only intended them to speak some very modern doctrines upon the subject, but placed them in circumstances where their peculiar hardships are displayed in such a way as to elicit our sympathy. Courage, said Moll Flanders, was what women needed, and the power to 'stand their ground'; and at once gave practical demonstration of the benefits that would result. Roxana, a lady of the same profession, argues more subtly against the slavery of marriage. She 'had started a new thing in the world' the merchant told her; 'it was a way of arguing contrary to the general practise'. But Defoe is the last writer to be guilty of bald preaching. Roxana keeps our attention because she is blessedly unconscious that she is in any good sense an example to her sex and is thus at liberty to own that part of her argument is 'of an elevated strain which was really not in my thoughts at first, at all'. The knowledge of her own frailties and the honest questioning of her own motives, which that knowledge begets, have the happy result of keeping her fresh and human when the martyrs and pioneers of so many problem novels have shrunk and shrivelled to the pegs and props of their respective creeds.

But the claim of Defoe upon our admiration does not rest upon the fact that he can be shown to have anticipated some of the views of Meredith, or to have written scenes which (the odd suggestion occurs) might have been turned into plays by Ibsen. Whatever his ideas upon the position of women, they are an incidental result of his chief virtue, which is that he deals with the important and lasting side of things and not with the passing and trivial. He is often dull. He can imitate the matter-of-fact precision of a scientific traveller until we wonder that his pen could trace or his brain conceive what has not even the excuse of truth to soften its dryness. He leaves out the whole of vegetable nature, and a large part of human nature. All this we may admit, though we have to admit defects as grave in many writers whom we call great. But that does not impair the peculiar merit of what remains. Having at the outset limited his scope and confined his ambitions he achieves a truth of insight which is far rarer and more enduring than the truth of fact which he professed to make his aim. Moll Flanders and her friends recommended themselves to him not because they were, as we should say,

'picturesque'; nor, as he affirmed, because they were examples of evil living by which the public might profit. It was their natural veracity, bred in them by a life of hardship, that excited his interest. For them there were no excuses; no kindly shelter obscured their motives. Poverty was their taskmaster. Defoe did not pronounce more than a judgement of the lips upon their failings. But their courage and resource and tenacity delighted him. He found their society full of good talk, and pleasant stories, and faith in each other, and morality of a home-made kind. Their fortunes had that infinite variety which he praised and relished and beheld with wonder in his own life. These men and women, above all, were free to talk openly of the passions and desires which have moved men and women since the beginning of time, and thus even now they keep their vitality undiminished. There is a dignity that is looked at openly. Even the sordid subject of money, which plays so large a part in their histories, becomes not sordid but tragic when it stands not for ease and consequence but for honour, honesty, and life itself. You may object that Defoe is humdrum, but never that he is engrossed with petty things.

He belongs, indeed, to the school of the great plain writers, whose work is founded upon a knowledge of what is most persistent, though not most seductive, in human nature. The view of London from Hungerford Bridge, grey, serious, massive, and full of the subdued stir of traffic and business, prosaic if it were not for the masts of the ships and the towers and domes of the city, brings him to mind. The tattered girls with violets in their hands at the street corners, and the old weather-beaten women patiently displaying their matches and bootlaces beneath the shelter of arches, seem like characters from his books. He is of the school of Crabbe and of Gissing, and not merely a fellow-pupil in the same stern place of learning, but its founder and master.

‘Robinson Crusoe’

THERE are many ways of approaching this classical volume; but which shall we choose? Shall we begin by saying that, since Sidney died at Zutphen leaving the *Arcadia* unfinished, great changes had come over English life, and the novel had chosen, or had been forced to choose, its direction? A middle class had come into existence, able to read and anxious to read not only about the loves of princes and princesses, but about themselves and the details of their humdrum lives. Stretched upon a thousand pens, prose had accommodated itself to the demand; it had fitted itself to express the facts of life rather than the poetry. That is certainly one way of approaching *Robinson Crusoe*—through the development of the novel; but another immediately suggests itself—through the life of the author. Here too, in the heavenly pastures of biography, we may spend many more hours than are needed to read the book itself from cover to cover. The date of Defoe’s birth, to begin with, is doubtful—was it 1660 or 1661? Then again, did he spell his name in one word or in two? And who were his ancestors? He is said to have been a hosier; but what, after all, was a hosier in the seventeenth century? He became a pamphleteer, and enjoyed the confidence of William the Third; one of his pamphlets caused him to be stood in the pillory and imprisoned at Newgate; he was employed by Harley and later by Godolphin; he was the first of the hireling journalists; he wrote innumerable pamphlets and articles; also *Moll Flanders* and *Robinson Crusoe*; he had a wife and six children; was spare in figure, with a hooked nose, a sharp chin, grey eyes, and a large mole near his mouth. Nobody who has any slight acquaintance with English literature needs to be told how many hours can be spent and how many lives have been spent in tracing the development of the novel and in examining the chins of the novelists. Only now and then, as we turn from theory to biography and from biography to theory, a doubt insinuates itself—if we knew the very moment of Defoe’s birth and whom he loved and why, if we had by heart the history of the origin, rise, growth, decline, and fall of the English novel from its conception

(say) in Egypt to its decease in the wilds (perhaps) of Paraguay, should we suck an ounce of additional pleasure from *Robinson Crusoe* or read it one whit more intelligently?

For the book itself remains. However we may wind and wriggle, loiter and dally in our approach to books, a lonely battle waits us at the end. There is a piece of business to be transacted between writer and reader before any further dealings are possible, and to be reminded in the middle of this private interview that Defoe sold stockings, had brown hair, and was stood in the pillory is a distraction and a worry. Our first task, and it is often formidable enough, is to master his perspective. Until we know how the novelist orders his world, the ornaments of that world, which the critics press upon us, the adventures of the writer, to which biographers draw attention, are superfluous possessions of which we can make no use. All alone we must climb upon the novelist's shoulders and gaze through his eyes until we, too, understand in what order he ranges the large common objects upon which novelists are fated to gaze: man and men; behind them Nature; and above them that power which for convenience and brevity we may call God. And at once confusion, misjudgement, and difficulty begin. Simple as they appear to us, these objects can be made monstrous and indeed unrecognizable by the manner in which the novelist relates them to each other. It would seem to be true that people who live cheek by jowl and breathe the same air vary enormously in their sense of proportion; to one the human being is vast, the tree minute; to the other, trees are huge and human beings insignificant little objects in the background. So, in spite of the text-books, writers may live at the same time and see nothing the same size. Here is Scott, for example, with his mountains looming huge and his men therefore drawn to scale; Jane Austen picking out the roses on her teacups to match the wit of her dialogues; while Peacock bends over heaven and earth one fantastic distorting mirror in which a tea-cup may be Vesuvius or Vesuvius a tea-cup. Nevertheless Scott, Jane Austen, and Peacock lived through the same years; they saw the same world; they are covered in the text-books by the same stretch of literary history.* It is in their perspective that they are different. If, then, it were granted us to grasp this firmly, for ourselves, the battle would end in victory; and we could turn, secure in our intimacy, to enjoy the

various delights with which the critics and biographers so generously supply us.

But here many difficulties arise. For we have our own vision of the world; we have made it from our own experience and prejudices, and it is therefore bound up with our own vanities and loves. It is impossible not to feel injured and insulted if tricks are played and our private harmony is upset. Thus when *Jude the Obscure* appears or a new volume of Proust, the newspapers are flooded with protests. Major Gibbs of Cheltenham would put a bullet through his head tomorrow if life were as Hardy paints it; Miss Wiggs of Hampstead must protest that though Proust's art is wonderful, the real world, she thanks God, has nothing in common with the distortions of a perverted Frenchman. Both the gentleman and the lady are trying to control the novelist's perspective so that it shall resemble and reinforce their own. But the great writer—the Hardy or the Proust—goes on his way regardless of the rights of private property; by the sweat of his brow he brings order from chaos; he plants his tree there, and his man here; he makes the figure of his deity remote or present as he wills. In masterpieces—books, that is, where the vision is clear and order has been achieved—he inflicts his own perspective upon us so severely that as often as not we suffer agonies—our vanity is injured because our own order is upset; we are afraid because the old supports are being wrenched from us; and we are bored—for what pleasure or amusement can be plucked from a brand new idea? Yet from anger, fear, and boredom a rare and lasting delight is sometimes born.

Robinson Crusoe, it may be, is a case in point. It is a masterpiece, and it is a masterpiece largely because Defoe has throughout kept consistently to his own sense of perspective. For this reason he thwarts us and flouts us at every turn. Let us look at the theme largely and loosely, comparing it with our preconceptions. It is, we know, the story of a man who is thrown, after many perils and adventures, alone upon a desert island. The mere suggestion—peril and solitude and a desert island—is enough to rouse in us the expectation of some far land on the limits of the world; of the sun rising and the sun setting; of man, isolated from his kind, brooding alone upon the nature of society and the strange ways of men. Before we open the book we have perhaps vaguely sketched

out the kind of pleasure we expect it to give us. We read; and we are rudely contradicted on every page. There are no sunsets and no sunrises; there is no solitude and no soul. There is, on the contrary, staring us full in the face nothing but a large earthenware pot. We are told, that is to say, that it was the 1st of September 1651; that the hero's name is Robinson Crusoe; and that his father has the gout. Obviously, then, we must alter our attitude. Reality, fact, substance is going to dominate all that follows. We must hastily alter our proportions throughout; Nature must furl her splendid purples; she is only the giver of drought and water; man must be reduced to a struggling, life-preserving animal; and God shrivel into a magistrate whose seat, substantial and somewhat hard, is only a little way above the horizon. Each sortie of ours in pursuit of information upon these cardinal points of perspective—God, man, Nature—is snubbed back with ruthless common sense. Robinson Crusoe thinks of God: 'sometimes I would expostulate with myself, why providence should thus completely ruin its creatures. . . . But something always return'd swift upon me to check these thoughts.' God does not exist. He thinks of Nature, the fields 'adorn'd with flowers and grass, and full of very fine woods', but the important thing about a wood is that it harbours an abundance of parrots who may be tamed and taught to speak. Nature does not exist. He considers the dead, whom he has killed himself. It is of the utmost importance that they should be buried at once, for 'they lay open to the sun and would presently be offensive'. Death does not exist. Nothing exists except an earthenware pot. Finally, that is to say, we are forced to drop our own preconceptions and to accept what Defoe himself wishes to give us.

Let us then go back to the beginning and repeat again, 'I was born in the year 1632 in the city of York of a good family'. Nothing could be plainer, more matter of fact, than that beginning. We are drawn on soberly to consider all the blessings of orderly, industrious middle-class life. There is no greater good fortune we are assured than to be born of the British middle class. The great are to be pitied and so are the poor; both are exposed to distempers and uneasiness; the middle station between the mean and the great is the best; and its virtues—temperance, moderation, quietness, and health—are the most desirable. It was a

sorry thing, then, when by some evil fate a middle-class youth was bitten with the foolish love of adventure. So he prosed on, drawing, little by little, his own portrait, so that we never forget it—imprinting upon us indelibly, for he never forgets it either, his shrewdness, his caution, his love of order and comfort and respectability; until by whatever means, we find ourselves at sea, in a storm; and, peering out, everything is seen precisely as it appears to Robinson Crusoe. The waves, the seamen, the sky, the ship—all are seen through those shrewd, middle-class, unimaginative eyes. There is no escaping him. Everything appears as it would appear to that naturally cautious, apprehensive, conventional, and solidly matter-of-fact intelligence. He is incapable of enthusiasm. He has a natural slight distaste for the sublimities of Nature. He suspects even Providence of exaggeration. He is so busy and has such an eye to the main chance that he notices only a tenth part of what is going on round him. Everything is capable of a rational explanation, he is sure, if only he had time to attend to it. We are much more alarmed by the 'vast great creatures' that swim out in the night and surround his boat than he is. He at once takes his gun and fires at them, and off they swim—whether they are lions or not he really cannot say. Thus before we know it we are opening our mouths wider and wider. We are swallowing monsters that we should have jibbed at if they had been offered us by an imaginative and flamboyant traveller. But anything that this sturdy middle-class man notices can be taken for a fact. He is for ever counting his barrels, and making sensible provisions for his water supply; nor do we ever find him tripping even in a matter of detail. Has he forgotten, we wonder, that he has a great lump of beeswax on board? Not at all. But as he had already made candles out of it, it is not nearly as great on page thirty-eight as it was on page twenty-three. When for a wonder he leaves some inconsistency hanging loose—why if the wild cats are so very tame are the goats so very shy?—we are not seriously perturbed, for we are sure that there was a reason, and a very good one, had he time to give it us. But the pressure of life when one is fending entirely for oneself alone on a desert island is really no laughing matter. It is no crying one either. A man must have an eye to everything; it is no time for raptures about Nature when the lightning may explode one's gunpowder

—it is imperative to seek a safer lodging for it. And so by means of telling the truth undeviatingly as it appears to him—by being a great artist and forgoing this and daring that in order to give effect to his prime quality, a sense of reality—he comes in the end to make common actions dignified and common objects beautiful. To dig, to bake, to plant, to build—how serious these simple occupations are; hatchets, scissors, logs, axes—how beautiful these simple objects become. Unimpeded by comment, the story marches on with magnificent downright simplicity. Yet how could comment have made it more impressive? It is true that he takes the opposite way from the psychologist's—he describes the effect of emotion on the body, not on the mind. But when he says how, in a moment of anguish, he clinched his hands so that any soft thing would have been crushed; how 'my teeth in my head would strike together, and set against one another so strong that for the time I could not part them again', the effect is as deep as pages of analysis could have made it. His own instinct in the matter is right. 'Let the naturalists', he says, 'explain these things, and the reason and manner of them; all I can say to them is, to describe the fact. . . .' If you are Defoe, certainly to describe the fact is enough; for the fact is the right fact. By means of this genius for fact Defoe achieves effects that are beyond any but the great masters of descriptive prose. He has only to say a word or two about 'the grey of the morning' to paint vividly a windy dawn. A sense of desolation and of the deaths of many men is conveyed by remarking in the most prosaic way in the world, 'I never saw them afterwards, or any sign of them except three of their hats, one cap, and two shoes that were not fellows'. When at last he exclaims, 'Then to see how like a king I din'd too all alone, attended by my servants'—his parrot and his dog and his two cats, we cannot help but feel that all humanity is on a desert island alone—though Defoe at once informs us, for he has a way of snubbing off our enthusiasms, that the cats were not the same cats that had come in the ship. Both of those were dead; these cats were new cats, and as a matter of fact cats became very troublesome before long from their fecundity, whereas dogs, oddly enough, did not breed at all.

Thus Defoe, by reiterating that nothing but a plain earthenware pot stands in the foreground, persuades us to see remote

islands and the solitudes of the human soul. By believing fixedly in the solidity of the pot and its earthiness, he has subdued every other element to his design; he has roped the whole universe into harmony. And is there any reason, we ask as we shut the book, why the perspective that a plain earthenware pot exacts should not satisfy us as completely, once we grasp it, as man himself in all his sublimity standing against a background of broken mountains and tumbling oceans with stars flaming in the sky?

Congreve's Comedies¹

THE four great plays through which Congreve is immortal take up very little space, and can be bought very cheaply; but they can be seen very seldom, and to read them, silently and in solitude, is to do them an injustice. The best way to repair that injustice is to consider them with the author's help more critically, if more coldly, than we are able when the words are embodied on the stage. Congreve, the man of mystery, the man of superb genius who ceased to use his genius at his height, was also, as any reader may guess from almost any page, of the class of writers who are not so entirely submerged in their gift but that they can watch it curiously and to some extent guide it even when they are possessed by it. Whatever he has to say in a letter, in a dedication, in a prologue about his art is worth listening to with all our ears. Let us then put to him some of the questions that the remembrance of his plays has left over in the mind before we allow the Tattles and the Foresights, the Wishforts and the Millamants to sweep us off our feet.

First there is the old grievance which, though it sounds elementary, must always have its say: the grievance that is summed up in the absurd names he gives his characters— Vainlove, Fondlewife, and the rest—as if we were back again in the age of mummer and cart, when one humour to one character was all the audience could grasp or the actor express. To that he replies, ‘. . . the distance of the stage requires the figures represented to be something larger than the life’, a warning to the reader to suppress the desire for certain subtleties which the playwright cannot satisfy, a reminder that the imponderable suggestions which come together on silent feet in fiction are denied the playwright. He must speak; the speaking voice is the only instrument allowed him. That introduces a second question: they must speak, but why so artificially? Men and women were never so witty as he makes them; they never speak so aptly, so instantly, and with such a wealth of figure and imagery as he would have us believe. And to

¹ Written in August, 1937

that he replies, 'I believe if a poet should steal a dialogue of any length, from the extempore discourse of the two wittiest men upon earth, he would find the scene but coldly receiv'd by the town'. People on the stage must be larger than life because they are further from us than in the book; and cleverer than life because if he set down their actual words we should be bored to distraction. Every writer has his selection to make; his artifice to enforce; these are the playwright's. These are the methods by which he puts us in the frame of mind needed for his purpose.

Still there remains another grievance which is not so elementary nor so easily laid to rest; and that is, of course, the plot. Who can remember the plot when the book is shut? Who has not been teased by its intricacies while the book is open? As everybody is agreed something must happen, and it matters very little what happens if it serves to make the characters more real, or more profound, than they would otherwise have been; a plot should put the characters on the rack and show them thus extended. But what are we to say when the plot merely teases and distorts the character, and distracts us from any more profound enjoyment than that of asking who is behind that door, who is behind that mask? To this Congreve the critic gives us no satisfactory answer. Sometimes, as in the preface to *The Double Dealer*, he prides himself that he has maintained 'the unities of the drama'. But a certain doubt declares itself elsewhere. In the dedication to *The Way of the World* he envies Terence. Terence, he points out, had 'great advantages to encourage his undertaking for he built most on the foundations of Menander; his plots were generally modelled and his characters ready drawn to his hand'. Either then, one must conclude, the old weather-worn plots which slip into the mind so smoothly that we scarcely notice them--the legendary, the prehistoric--are the only tolerable ones, or we are forced to suppose that the plot-making genius is so seldom combined with the genius for creating character that we must allow even Shakespeare to fail here--even Shakespeare sometimes lets the plot dictate to the character; suffers the story to drag the character out of its natural orbit. And Congreve, who had not Shakespeare's miraculous fecundity, who could not cover up the farfetched and the mechanical with the abundance of his imagination and the splendour of his poetry, fails here. The character is

squeezed to fit the situation; the machine has set its iron stamp upon live flesh and blood.

But, now that we have dismissed the questions that hang about an unopened book, let us submit ourselves to the dramatist in action. The dramatist is in action from the very first word on the very first page. There are no preliminaries, no introductions; the curtain rises and they are in the thick of it. Never was any prose so quick. Miraculously pat, on the spot, each speaker caps the last, without fumbling or hesitation; their minds are full charged; it seems as if they had to rein themselves in, bursting with energy as they are, alive and alert to their finger-tips. It is we who fumble, make irrelevant observations, notice the chocolate or the cinnamon, the sword or the muslin, until the illusion takes hold of us, and what with the rhythm of the speech and the indescribable air of tension, of high breeding that pervades it, the world of the stage becomes the real world and the other, outside the play, but the husk and cast-off clothing. To attempt to reduce this first impression to words is as futile as to explain a physical sensation—the slap of a wave, the rush of wind, the scent of a bean field. It is conveyed by the curl of a phrase on the ear; by speed; by stillness. It is as impossible to analyse Congreve's prose as to distinguish the elements—the bark of a dog, the song of a bird, the drone of the branches which make the summer air. But then, since words have meaning, we notice here a sudden depth beneath the surface, a meaning not grasped but felt, and then come to realize something not merely dazzling in this world, but natural, for all its wit; even familiar, and traditional. It has a coarseness, a humour something like Shakespeare's; a toppling imagination that heaps image upon image; a lightning swiftness of apprehension that snatches a dozen meanings and compacts them into one.

And yet it is not Shakespeare's world; for just as we think, tossed up on the crest of some wonderful extravagance of humour, to be swept into poetry we come slap against hard common sense, and realize that here is a different combination of elements from the poet's. There is tragedy—Lady Touchwood and Maskwell in *The Double Dealer* are not comic figures—but when tragedy and comedy collide it is comedy that wins. Lady Touchwood seizes her dagger; but she drops it. A moment more and it would have

been too late. Already she has passed from prose to rant. Already we feel not that the scene is ridiculous, for there is passion there; but that it is unsafe. Congreve has lost his control, his fine balance is upset; he feels the ground tremble beneath him. Mr Brisk's comment, 'This is all very surprising, let me perish,' is the appropriate one. With that he finds his feet and withdraws.

The world that we have entered, then, in Congreve's comedies is not the world of the elemental passions. It is an enclosure surrounded with the four walls of a living-room. Ladies and gentlemen go through their figures with their tongues to the measure dictated by common sense as precisely as they dance the minuet with their feet; but the image has only a superficial rightness. We have only to compare Congreve's comedy with Goldsmith's or with Sheridan's, let alone with Wilde's, to be aware that if, to distinguish him from the Elizabethans, we confine him to a room, not a world, that room is not the drawing-room of the eighteenth century, still less is it the drawing-room of the nineteenth century. Drays roar on the cobbles beneath; the brawling of street hucksters and tavern rioters comes in at the open windows. There is a coarseness of language, an extravagance of humour, and a freedom of manners which cast us back to the Elizabethans. Yet it is in a drawing-room, surrounded by all the fopperies and refinements of the most sophisticated society in the world, that these ladies and gentlemen speak so freely, drink so deeply, and smell so strong. It is the contrast, perhaps, that makes us more aware of the coarseness of the Restoration dramatists than of the Elizabethan. A great lady who spits on the floor offends where a fishwife merely amuses. And perhaps it was for this reason that Congreve incurred first the majestic censure of Dr. Johnson and then the more supercilious contempt of the Victorians who neglected, Sir Edmund Gosse informs us, either to read him or to act him. More conscious than we are of the drawing-room, they were quicker repelled perhaps by any violation of its decencies.

But however we may account for the change, to reach *The Way of the World* through *The Old Bachelor*, *The Double Dealer*, and *Love for Love* is to become more and more at loggerheads with Dr. Johnson's dictum:

It is acknowledged, with universal conviction, that the perusal of his works will make no man better; and that their ultimate effect is to represent pleasure in alliance with vice, and to relax those obligations by which life ought to be regulated.

On the contrary, to read Congreve's plays is to be convinced that we may learn from them many lessons much to our advantage both as writers of books and—if the division is possible—as lovers of life. We might learn there, to begin with, the discipline of plain speech; to leave nothing lurking in the insidious shades of obscurity that can be said in words. The phrase is always finished; nothing is left to dwindle into darkness, to sound after the words are over. Then, when we have learnt to express ourselves, we may go on to observe the indefatigable hard work of a great writer: how he keeps us entertained because something is always happening, and on the alert because that something is always changing, and by contrasting laughter and seriousness, action and thought, keeps the edge of the emotions always sharp. To ring so many changes and keep up so rapid a speed of movement might well be enough, but in addition each of these characters has its own being, and each differs—the sea-dog from the fop, the old eccentric from the man of the world, the maid from the mistress. He has to enter into each; to leave his private pigeon-hole and invest himself with the emotions of another human being, so that speech meets speech at full tilt, each from its own angle.

A genius for phrase-making helps him. Now he strikes off a picture in a flash: ' . . . there he lies with a great beard, like a Russian bear upon a drift of snow'. Now in a marvellous rush of rapid invention he conveys a whole chapter of guttersnipe life.

That I took from the washing of old gauze and weaving of dead hair, with a bleak blue nose, over a chafing dish of starv'd embers, and dining behind a traverse rag, in a shop no bigger than a bird cage.

Then, again, like some miraculous magpie he repeats the naïve words, follows the crude emotions, of a great gawky girl like Miss Prue. However it is done, to enter into such diverse characters is, the moralists may note, at any rate to forget your own. Undoubtedly it is true that his language is often coarse; but then it is also true that his characters are more alive, quicker to strip off

veils, more intolerant of circumlocutions than the ordinary run of people. They are reduced to phrase-making oftener than we could wish, and fine phrases often sound cynical; but then the situations are often so improbable that only fine phrases will cover them, and words, we must remember, were still to Congreve's generation as delightful as beads to a savage. Without that rapture the audacity of his splendid phrases would have been impossible.

But if we have to admit that some of the characters are immoral, and some of the opinions cynical, still we must ask how far we can call a character immoral or an opinion cynical if we feel that the author himself was aware of its immorality and intended its cynicism? And, though it is a delicate matter to separate an author from his characters and detach him from their opinions, no one can read Congreve's comedies without detecting a common atmosphere, a general attitude that holds them together for all their diversity. The stress laid on certain features creates a common likeness as unmistakable as the eyes and nose of a family face. The plays are veined through and through with satire. 'Therefore I would rail in my writings and be revenged', says Valentine in *Love for Love*. Congreve's satire seems sometimes, as Scandal says, to have the whole world for its butt. Yet there is underneath a thinking mind, a mind that doubts and questions. Some hint thrown out in passing calls us back to make us ponder it: for instance, Mellefont's 'Ay, My Lord, I shall have the same reason for happiness that your Lordship has, I shall think myself happy'. Or, again, a sudden phrase like 'There's comfort in a hand stretched out to one that's sinking' suggests, by its contrast, a sensibility that trembles on the edge of tears. Nothing is stressed; sentiment never broadens into sentimentality; everything passes as quickly as a ray of light and blends as indistinguishably. But if we needs must prove that the creator of Sir Sampson Legend and old Foresight had not only a prodigious sense of human absurdity and a bitter conviction of its insincerity but as quick a regard for its honesty and decency as any Victorian or Dr. Johnson himself, we need only point to his simplicity. After we have run up the scale of absurdity to its sublime heights a single word again and again recalls us to common sense. 'That my poor father should be so very silly' is one such comment, immensely

effective in its place. Again and again we are brought back to sanity and daylight by the sound of a voice speaking in its natural tones.

But it is the Valentines, the Mirabells, the Angelicas, and the Millamants who keep us in touch with truth and, by striking a sudden serious note, bring the rest to scale. They have sharpened their emotions upon their wits. They have flouted each other; bargained; taken love and examined it by the light of reason; teased and tested each other almost beyond endurance. But when it comes to the point and she must be serious, the swiftest of all heroines, whose mind and body seem equally winged, so that there is a rush in the air as she passes and we exclaim with Scandal, 'Gone; why, she was never here, nor anywhere else', has a centre of stillness in her heart and enough emotion in her words to furbish out a dozen pages of eloquent disquisition. 'Why does not the man take me? Would you have me give myself to you over again?' The words are simple, and yet, after what has already been said, so brimming with meaning that Mirabell's reply, 'Ay, over and over again', seems to receive into itself more than words can say. And this depth of emotion, we have to reflect, the change and complexity that are implied in it, have been reached in the direct way; that is by making each character speak in his or her own person, without addition from the author or any soliloquy save such as can be spoken on the stage in the presence of an audience. No, whether we read him from the moralist's angle or from the artist's, to agree with Dr. Johnson is an impossibility. To read the comedies is not to 'relax those obligations by which life ought to be regulated'. On the contrary, the more slowly we read him and the more carefully, the more meaning we find, the more beauty we discover.

Here perhaps, in the reflections that linger when the book is shut and *The Way of the World* is finished, lies the answer to the old puzzle why at the height of his powers he stopped writing. It is that he had done all that was possible in that kind. The last play held more than any audience could grasp at a single sitting. The bodily presence of actors and actresses must, it would seem, often overpower the words that they had to speak. He had forgotten, or disregarded, his own axiom that 'the distance of the stage requires the figures represented to be something larger than

the life'. He had written, as he says in the dedication, for 'the Few', and 'but little of it was prepar'd for that general taste which seems now to be predominant in the palates of our audience'. He had come to despise his public, and it was time therefore either to write differently or to leave off. But the novel, which offered another outlet, was uncongenial; he was incorrigibly dramatic, as his one attempt at fiction shows. And poetry, too, was denied him, for though again and again he brings us to the edge of poetry in a phrase like 'You're a woman, One to whom Heav'n gave beauty, when it grafted roses on a briar', and suggests, as Meredith does in his novels, the mood of poetry, he was unable to pass beyond human idiosyncrasy to the more general statement of poetry. He must move and laugh and bring us into touch with action instantly.

Since these two paths then were blocked, what other way was there for a writer of Congreve's temperament but to make an end? Dangerous as it is to distinguish a writer from his work, we cannot help but recognize a man behind the plays—a man as sensitive to criticism as he was skilled in inflicting it on others; for what is his defiance of the critics but deference to them? A scholar too with all the scholar's fastidiousness; a man of birth and breeding for whom the vulgar side of fame held little gratification; a man, in short, who might well have said with Valentine, 'Nay, I am not violently bent upon the trade', and sit, handsome and portly and sedate as his portrait shows him, 'very gravely with his hat over his eyes', as the gossips observed him, content to strive no more.

But indeed he left very little for the gossips to feed upon; no writer of his time and standing passed through the world more privately. Voltaire left a dubious anecdote; the Duchess of Marlborough, it is said, had an effigy of him set at her table after his death; his few discreet letters provide an occasional hint: 'Ease and quiet is what I hunt after'; 'I feel very sensibly and silently for those whom I love'—that is all. But there is a fitness in this very absence of relics as though he had consumed whatever was irrelevant to his work and left us to find him there. And there, indeed, we find something beyond himself; beyond the many figures of his fertile and brilliant imagination; beyond Tattle and Ben, Foresight and Angelica, Maskwell and Lady

COLLECTED ESSAYS

Wishfort, Mirabell and Mellefont and Millamant. Between them they have created what is not to be confined within the limits of a single character or expressed in any one play—a world where each part depends upon the other, the serene, impersonal, and indestructible world of art.

Addison¹

IN July, 1843, Lord Macaulay pronounced the opinion that Joseph Addison had enriched our literature with compositions 'that will live as long as the English language'. But when Lord Macaulay pronounced an opinion it was not merely an opinion. Even now, at a distance of seventy-six years, the words seem to issue from the mouth of the chosen representative of the people. There is an authority about them, a sonority, a sense of responsibility, which put us in mind of a Prime Minister making a proclamation on behalf of a great empire rather than of a journalist writing about a deceased man of letters for a magazine. The article upon Addison is, indeed, one of the most vigorous of the famous essays. Florid, and at the same time extremely solid, the phrases seem to build up a monument, at once square and lavishly festooned with ornament, which should serve Addison for shelter so long as one stone of Westminster Abbey stands upon another. Yet, though we may have read and admired this particular essay times out of number (as we say when we have read anything three times over), it has never occurred to us, strangely enough, to believe that it is true. That is apt to happen to the admiring reader of Macaulay's essays. While delighting in their richness, force, and variety, and finding every judgement, however emphatic, proper in its place, it seldom occurs to us to connect these sweeping assertions and undeniable convictions with anything so minute as a human being. So it is with Addison. 'If we wish', Macaulay writes, 'to find anything more vivid than Addison's best portraits, we must go either to Shakespeare or to Cervantes.' 'We have not the least doubt that if Addison had written a novel on an extensive plan it would have been superior to any that we possess.' His essays, again, 'fully entitle him to the rank of a great poet'; and, to complete the edifice, we have Voltaire proclaimed 'the prince of buffoons', and together with Swift forced to stoop so low that Addison takes rank above them both as a humorist.

¹ Written in 1919

Examined separately, such flourishes of ornament look grotesque enough, but in their place—such is the persuasive power of design—they are part of the decoration; they complete the monument. Whether Addison or another is interred within, it is a very fine tomb. But now that two centuries have passed since the real body of Addison was laid by night under the Abbey floor, we are, through no merit of our own, partially qualified to test the first of the flourishes on that fictitious tombstone to which, though it may be empty, we have done homage, in a formal kind of way, these sixty-seven years. The compositions of Addison will live as long as the English language. Since every moment brings proof that our mother tongue is more lusty and lively than sorts with complete sedateness or chastity, we need only concern ourselves with the vitality of Addison. Neither lusty nor lively is the adjective we should apply to the present condition of the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*. To take a rough test, it is possible to discover how many people in the course of a year borrow Addison's works from the public library, and a particular instance affords us the not very encouraging information that during nine years two people yearly take out the first volume of the *Spectator*. The second volume is less in request than the first. The inquiry is not a cheerful one. From certain marginal comments and pencil marks it seems that these rare devotees seek out only the famous passages and, as their habit is, score what we are bold enough to consider the least admirable phrases. No; if Addison lives at all, it is not in the public libraries. It is in libraries that are markedly private, secluded, shaded by lilac trees and brown with folios, that he still draws his faint, regular breath. If any man or woman is going to solace himself with a page of Addison before the June sun is out of the sky today, it is in some such pleasant retreat as this.

Yet all over England at intervals, perhaps wide ones, we may be sure that there are people engaged in reading Addison, whatever the year or season. For Addison is very well worth reading. The temptation to read Pope on Addison, Macaulay on Addison, Thackeray on Addison, Johnson on Addison rather than Addison himself is to be resisted, for you will find, if you study the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, glance at *Cato*, and run through the remainder of the six moderate-sized volumes, that Addison is neither Pope's

Addison nor anybody else's Addison, but a separate, independent individual still capable of casting a clear-cut shape of himself upon the consciousness, turbulent and distracted as it is, of nineteen hundred and nineteen. It is true that the fate of the lesser shades is always a little precarious. They are so easily obscured or distorted. It seems so often scarcely worth while to go through the cherishing and humanizing process which is necessary to get into touch with a writer of the second class who may, after all, have little to give us. The earth is crusted over them; their features are obliterated, and perhaps it is not a head of the best period that we rub clean in the end, but only the chip of an old pot. The chief difficulty with the lesser writers, however, is not only the effort. It is that our standards have changed. The things that they like are not the things that we like; and as the charm of their writing depends much more upon taste than upon conviction, a change of manners is often quite enough to put us out of touch altogether. That is one of the most troublesome barriers between ourselves and Addison. He attached great importance to certain qualities. He had a very precise notion of what we are used to call 'niceness' in man or woman. He was extremely fond of saying that men ought not to be atheists, and that women ought not to wear large petticoats. This directly inspires in us not so much a sense of distaste as a sense of difference. Dutifully, if at all, we strain our imaginations to conceive the kind of audience to whom these precepts were addressed. The *Tatler* was published in 1709; the *Spectator* a year or two later. What was the state of England at that particular moment? Why was Addison so anxious to insist upon the necessity of a decent and cheerful religious belief? Why did he so constantly, and in the main kindly, lay stress upon the foibles of women and their reform? Why was he so deeply impressed with the evils of party government? Any historian will explain; but it is always a misfortune to have to call in the services of any historian. A writer should give us direct certainty; explanations are so much water poured into the wine. As it is, we can only feel that these counsels are addressed to ladies in hoops and gentlemen in wigs—a vanished audience which has learnt its lesson and gone its way and the preacher with it. We can only smile and marvel and perhaps admire the clothes.

And that is not the way to read. To be thinking that dead people deserved these censures and admired this morality, judged the eloquence, which we find so frigid, sublime, the philosophy to us so superficial, profound, to take a collector's joy in such signs of antiquity, is to treat literature as if it were a broken jar of undeniable age but doubtful beauty, to be stood in a cabinet behind glass doors. The charm which still makes *Cato* very readable is much of this nature. When Syphax exclaims,

So, where our wide Numidian wastes extend,
Sudden, th'impetuous hurricanes descend,
Wheel through the air, in circling eddies play,
Tear up the sands, and sweep whole plains away,
The helpless traveller, with wild surprise,
Sees the dry desert all around him rise,
And smother'd in the dusty whirlwind dies,

we cannot help imagining the thrill in the crowded theatre, the feathers nodding emphatically on the ladies' heads, the gentlemen leaning forward to tap their canes, and everyone exclaiming to his neighbour how vastly fine it is and crying 'Bravo!' But how can *we* be excited? And so with Bishop Hurd and his notes—his 'finely observed', his 'wonderfully exact, both in the sentiment and expression', his serene confidence that when 'the present humour of idolizing Shakespeare is over', the time will come when *Cato* is 'supremely admired by all candid and judicious critics'. This is all very amusing and productive of pleasant fancies, both as to the faded frippery of our ancestors' minds and the bold opulence of our own. But it is not the intercourse of equals, let alone that other kind of intercourse, which as it makes us contemporary with the author, persuades us that his object is our own. Occasionally in *Cato* one may pick up a few lines that are not obsolete; but for the most part the tragedy which Dr. Johnson thought 'unquestionably the noblest production of Addison's genius' has become collector's literature.

Perhaps most readers approach the essays also with some suspicion as to the need of condescension in their minds. The question to be asked is whether Addison, attached as he was to certain standards of gentility, morality, and taste, has not become one of those people of exemplary character and charming urbanity

who must never be talked to about anything more exciting than the weather. We have some slight suspicion that the *Spectator* and the *Tatler* are nothing but talk, couched in perfect English, about the number of fine days this year compared with the number of wet the year before. The difficulty of getting on to equal terms with him is shown by the little fable which he introduces into one of the early numbers of the *Tatler*, of 'a young gentleman, of moderate understanding, but great vivacity, who . . . had got a little smattering of knowledge, just enough to make an atheist or a freethinker, but not a philosopher, or a man of sense'. This young gentleman visits his father in the country, and proceeds 'to enlarge the narrowness of the country notions; in which he succeeded so well, that he had seduced the butler by his table-talk, and staggered his eldest sister. . . . 'Till one day, talking of his setting dog . . . said "he did not question but Tray was as immortal as any one of the family"; and in the heat of the argument told his father, that for his own part, "he expected to die like a dog". Upon which, the old man, starting up in a very great passion, cried out, "Then, sirrah, you shall live like one"; and taking his cane in his hand, cudgelled him out of his system. This had so good an effect upon him, that he took up from that day, fell to reading good books, and is now a bencher in the Middle-Temple.' There is a good deal of Addison in that story: his dislike of 'dark and uncomfortable prospects'; his respect for 'principles which are the support, happiness, and glory of all public societies, as well as private persons'; his solicitude for the butler; and his conviction that to read good books and become a bencher in the Middle-Temple is the proper end for a very vivacious young gentleman. This Mr. Addison married a countess, 'gave his little senate laws', and, sending for young Lord Warwick, made that famous remark about seeing how a Christian can die which has fallen upon such evil days that our sympathies are with the foolish,¹ and perhaps fuddled, young peer rather than with the frigid gentleman, not too far gone for a last spasm of self-complacency, upon the bed.

Let us rub off such incrustations, so far as they are due to the corrosion of Pope's wit or the deposit of mid-Victorian lachrymosity, and see what, for us in our time, remains. In the first place, there remains the not despicable virtue, after two centuries

of existence, of being readable. Addison can fairly lay claim to that; and then, slipped in on the tide of the smooth, well-turned prose, are little eddies, diminutive waterfalls, agreeably diversifying the polished surface. We begin to take note of whims, fancies, peculiarities on the part of the essayist which light up the prim, impeccable countenance of the moralist and convince us that, however tightly he may have pursed his lips, his eyes are very bright and not so shallow after all. He is alert to his finger-tips. Little muffs, silver garters, fringed gloves draw his attention; he observes with a keen, quick glance, not unkindly, and full rather of amusement than of censure. To be sure, the age was rich in follies. Here were coffee-houses packed with politicians talking of Kings and Emperors and letting their own small affairs go to ruin. Crowds applauded the Italian opera every night without understanding a word of it. Critics discoursed of the unities. Men gave a thousand pounds for a handful of tulip roots. As for women—or ‘the fair sex’, as Addison liked to call them—their follies were past counting. He did his best to count them, with a loving particularity which roused the ill-humour of Swift. But he did it very charmingly, with a natural relish for the task, as the following passage shows:

I consider woman as a beautiful romantic animal, that may be adorned with furs and feathers, pearls and diamonds, ores and silks. The lynx shall cast its skin at her feet to make her a tippet; the peacock, parrot, and swan, shall pay contributions to her muff; the sea shall be searched for shells, and the rocks for gems; and every part of nature furnish out its share towards the embellishment of a creature that is the most consummate work of it. All this I shall indulge them in; but as for the petticoat I have been speaking of, I neither can nor will allow it.

In all these matters Addison was on the side of sense and taste and civilization. Of that little fraternity, often so obscure and yet so indispensable, who in every age keep themselves alive to the importance of art and letters and music, watching, discriminating, denouncing and delighting, Addison was one—distinguished and strangely contemporary with ourselves. It would have been, so one imagines, a great pleasure to take him a manuscript; a great enlightenment, as well as a great honour, to have his opinion. In

spite of Pope, one fancies that his would have been criticism of the best order, open-minded and generous to novelty, and yet, in the final resort, unfaltering in its standards. The boldness which is a proof of vigour is shown by his defence of *Chevy Chase*. He had so clear a notion of what he meant by the 'very spirit and soul of fine writing' as to track it down in an old barbarous ballad or rediscover it in 'that divine work' *Paradise Lost*. Moreover, far from being a connoisseur only of the still, settled beauties of the dead, he was aware of the present; a severe critic of its 'Gothic taste', vigilant in protecting the rights and honours of the language, and all in favour of simplicity and quiet. Here we have the Addison of Will's and Button's, who, sitting late into the night and drinking more than was good for him, gradually overcame his taciturnity and began to talk. Then he 'chained the attention of every one to him'. 'Addison's conversation', said Pope, 'had something in it more charming than I have found in any other man.' One can well believe it, for his essays at their best preserve the very cadence of easy yet exquisitely modulated conversation—the smile checked before it has broadened into laughter, the thought lightly turned from frivolity or abstraction, the ideas springing, bright, new, various, with the utmost spontaneity. He seems to speak what comes into his head, and is never at the trouble of raising his voice. But he has described himself in the character of the lute better than any one can do it for him.

The lute is a character directly opposite to the drum, that sounds very finely by itself, or in a very small concert. Its notes are exquisitely sweet, and very low, easily drowned in a multitude of instruments, and even lost among a few, unless you give a particular attention to it. A lute is seldom heard in a company of more than five, whereas a drum will show itself to advantage in an assembly of 500. The lutanists, therefore, are men of a fine genius, uncommon reflection, great affability, and esteemed chiefly by persons of a good taste, who are the only proper judges of so delightful and soft a melody.

Addison was a lutanist. No praise, indeed, could be less appropriate than Lord Macaulay's. To call Addison on the strength of his essays a great poet, or to prophesy that if he had written a

novel on an extensive plan it would have been 'superior to any that we possess', is to confuse him with the drums and trumpets; it is not merely to overpraise his merits, but to overlook them. Dr. Johnson superbly, and, as his manner is, once and for all has summed up the quality of Addison's poetic genius:

His poetry is first to be considered; of which it must be confessed that it has not often those felicities of diction which give lustre to sentiments, or that vigour of sentiment that animates diction; there is little of ardour, vehemence, or transport; there is very rarely the awfulness of grandeur, and not very often the splendour of elegance. He thinks justly; but he thinks faintly.

The Sir Roger de Coverley papers are those which have the most resemblance, on the surface, to a novel. But their merit consists in the fact that they do not adumbrate, or initiate, or anticipate anything; they exist, perfect, complete, entire in themselves. To read them as if they were a first hesitating experiment containing the seed of greatness to come is to miss the peculiar point of them. They are studies done from the outside by a quiet spectator. When read together they compose a portrait of the Squire and his circle all in characteristic positions—one with his rod, another with his hounds—but each can be detached from the rest without damage to the design or harm to himself. In a novel, where each chapter gains from the one before it or adds to the one that follows it, such separations would be intolerable. The speed, the intricacy, the design, would be mutilated. These particular qualities are perhaps lacking, but nevertheless Addison's method has great advantages. Each of these essays is very highly finished. The characters are defined by a succession of extremely neat, clean strokes. Inevitably, where the sphere is so narrow—an essay is only three or four pages in length—there is not room for great depth or intricate subtlety. Here, from the *Spectator*, is a good example of the witty and decisive manner in which Addison strikes out a portrait to fill the little frame:

Sombrius is one of these sons of sorrow. He thinks himself obliged in duty to be sad and disconsolate. He looks on a

sudden fit of laughter as a breach of his baptismal vow. An innocent jest startles him like blasphemy. Tell him of one who is advanced to a title of honour, he lifts up his hands and eyes; describe a public ceremony, he shakes his head; shew him a gay equipage, he blesses himself. All the little ornaments of life are pomps and vanities. Mirth is wanton, and wit profane. He is scandalized at youth for being lively, and at childhood for being playful. He sits at a christening, or at a marriage-feast, as at a funeral; sighs at the conclusion of a merry story, and grows devout when the rest of the company grow pleasant. After all Sombrius is a religious man, and would have behaved himself very properly, had he lived when Christianity was under a general persecution.

The novel is not a development from that model, for the good reason that no development along these lines is possible. Of its kind such a portrait is perfect; and when we find, scattered up and down the *Spectator* and the *Tatler*, numbers of such little masterpieces with fancies and anecdotes in the same style, some doubt as to the narrowness of such a sphere becomes inevitable. The form of the essay admits of its own particular perfection; and if anything is perfect the exact dimensions of its perfection become immaterial. One can scarcely settle whether, on the whole, one prefers a raindrop to the River Thames. When we have said all that we can say against them—that many are dull, others superficial, the allegories faded, the piety conventional, the morality trite—there still remains the fact that the essays of Addison are perfect essays. Always at the highest point of any art there comes a moment when everything seems in a conspiracy to help the artist, and his achievement becomes a natural felicity on his part of which he seems, to a later age, half-unconscious. So Addison, writing day after day, essay after essay, knew instinctively and exactly how to do it. Whether it was a high thing, or whether it was a low thing, whether an epic is more profound or a lyric more passionate, undoubtedly it is due to Addison that prose is now prosaic—the medium which makes it possible for people of ordinary intelligence to communicate their ideas to the world. Addison is the respectable ancestor of an innumerable progeny. Pick up the first weekly journal and the article upon the ‘Delights of Summer’ or the ‘Approach of Age’ will show his

influence. But it will also show, unless the name of Mr. Max Beerbohm, our solitary essayist, is attached to it, that we have lost the art of writing essays. What with our views and our virtues, our passions and profundities, the shapely silver drop, that held the sky in it and so many bright little visions of human life, is now nothing but a hold-all knobbed with luggage packed in a hurry. Even so, the essayist will make an effort, perhaps without knowing it, to write like Addison.

In his temperate and reasonable way Addison more than once amused himself with speculations as to the fate of his writings. He had a just idea of their nature and value. 'I have new-pointed all the batteries of ridicule', he wrote. Yet, because so many of his darts had been directed against ephemeral follies, 'absurd fashions, ridiculous customs, and affected forms of speech', the time would come, in a hundred years, perhaps, when his essays, he thought, would be 'like so many pieces of old plate, where the weight will be regarded, but the fashion lost'. Two hundred years have passed; the plate is worn smooth; the pattern almost rubbed out; but the metal is pure silver.

The *Sentimental Journey*

TRISTRAM SHANDY, though it is Sterne's first novel, was written at a time when many have written their twentieth, that is, when he was forty-five years old. But it bears every sign of maturity. No young writer could have dared to take such liberties with grammar and syntax and sense and propriety and the long-standing tradition of how a novel should be written. It needed a strong dose of the assurance of middle age and its indifference to censure to run such risks of shocking the lettered by the unconventionality of one's style, and the respectable by the irregularity of one's morals. But the risk was run and the success was prodigious. All the great, all the fastidious, were enchanted. Sterne became the idol of the town. Only in the roar of laughter and applause which greeted the book, the voice of the simple-minded public at large was to be heard protesting that it was a scandal coming from a clergyman and that the Archbishop of York ought to administer, to say the least of it, a scolding. The Archbishop, it seems, did nothing. But Sterne, however little he let it show on the surface, laid the criticism to heart. That heart too had been afflicted since the publication of *Tristram Shandy*. Eliza Draper, the object of his passion, had sailed to join her husband in Bombay. In his next book Sterne was determined to give effect to the change that had come over him, and to prove, not only the brilliance of his wit, but the depths of his sensibility. In his own words, 'my design in it was to teach us to love the world and our fellow creatures better than we do'. It was with such motives animating him that he sat down to write that narrative of a little tour in France which he called *A Sentimental Journey*.

But if it were possible for Sterne to correct his manners, it was impossible for him to correct his style. That had become as much a part of himself as his large nose or his brilliant eyes. With the first words—They order, said I, this matter better in France—we are in the world of *Tristram Shandy*. It is a world in which anything may happen. We hardly know what jest, what jibe, what flash of poetry is not going to glance suddenly through the gap which this astonishingly agile pen has cut in the thick-set hedge

of English prose. Is Sterne himself responsible? Does he know what he is going to say next for all his resolve to be on his best behaviour this time? The jerky, disconnected sentences are as rapid and it would seem as little under control as the phrases that fall from the lips of a brilliant talker. The very punctuation is that of speech, not writing, and brings the sound and associations of the speaking voice in with it. The order of the ideas, their suddenness and irrelevancy, is more true to life than to literature. There is a privacy in this intercourse which allows things to slip out unproved that would have been in doubtful taste had they been spoken in public. Under the influence of this extraordinary style the book becomes semi-transparent. The usual ceremonies and conventions which keep reader and writer at arm's length disappear. We are as close to life as we can be.

That Sterne achieved this illusion only by the use of extreme art and extraordinary pains is obvious without going to his manuscript to prove it. For though the writer is always haunted by the belief that somehow it must be possible to brush aside the ceremonies and conventions of writing and to speak to the reader as directly as by word of mouth, anyone who has tried the experiment has either been struck dumb by the difficulty, or waylaid into disorder and diffusivity unutterable. Sterne somehow brought off the astonishing combination. No writing seems to flow more exactly into the very folds and creases of the individual mind, to express its changing moods, to answer its lightest whim and impulse, and yet the result is perfectly precise and composed. The utmost fluidity exists with the utmost permanence. It is as if the tide raced over the beach hither and thither and left every ripple and eddy cut on the sand in marble.

Nobody, of course, stood more in need of the liberty to be himself than Sterne. For while there are writers whose gift is impersonal, so that a Tolstoy, for example, can create a character and leave us alone with it, Sterne must always be there in person to help us in our intercourse. Little or nothing of *A Sentimental Journey* would be left if all that we call Sterne himself were extracted from it. He has no valuable information to give, no reasoned philosophy to impart. He left London, he tells us, 'with so much precipitation that it never enter'd my mind that we were at war with France'. He has nothing to say of pictures or

churches or the misery or well-being of the countryside. He was travelling in France indeed, but the road was often through his own mind, and his chief adventures were not with brigands and precipices but with the emotions of his own heart.

This change in the angle of vision was in itself a daring innovation. Hitherto, the traveller had observed certain laws of proportion and perspective. The Cathedral had always been a vast building in any book of travels and the man a little figure, properly diminutive, by its side. But Sterne was quite capable of omitting the Cathedral altogether. A girl with a green satin purse might be much more important than Notre-Dame. For there is, he seems to hint, no universal scale of values. A girl may be more interesting than a cathedral; a dead monkey more instructive than a living philosopher. It is all a question of one's point of view. Sterne's eyes were so adjusted that small things often bulked larger in them than big. The talk of a barber about the buckle of his wig told him more about the character of the French than the grandiloquence of her statesmen.

I think I can see the precise and distinguishing marks of national characters more in these nonsensical *minutiae*, than in the most important matters of state; where great men of all nations talk and stalk so much alike, that I would not give nine-pence to chuse amongst them.

So too if one wishes to seize the essence of things as a sentimental traveller should, one should seek for it, not at broad noonday in large and open streets, but in an unobserved corner up a dark entry. One should cultivate a kind of shorthand which renders the several turns of looks and limbs into plain words. It was an art that Sterne had long trained himself to practise.

For my own part, by long habitude, I do it so mechanically that when I walk the streets of London, I go translating all the way; and have more than once stood behind in the circle, where not three words had been said, and have brought off twenty different dialogues with me, which I could have fairly wrote down and swore to.

It is thus that Sterne transfers our interest from the outer to the inner. It is no use going to the guide-book; we must consult our own minds; only they can tell us what is the comparative

importance of a cathedral, of a donkey, and of a girl with a green satin purse. In this preference for the windings of his own mind to the guide-book and its hammered high road, Sterne is singularly of our own age. In this interest in silence rather than in speech Sterne is the forerunner of the moderns. And for these reasons he is on far more intimate terms with us today than his great contemporaries the Richardsons and the Fieldings.

Yet there is a difference. For all his interest in psychology Sterne was far more nimble and less profound than the masters of this somewhat sedentary school have since become. He is after all telling a story, pursuing a journey, however arbitrary and zigzag his methods. For all our divagations, we do make the distance between Calais and Modane within the space of a very few pages. Interested as he was in the way in which he saw things, the things themselves also interested him acutely. His choice is capricious and individual, but no realist could be more brilliantly successful in rendering the impression of the moment. *A Sentimental Journey* is a succession of portraits—the Monk, the lady, the Chevalier, selling *pâtés*, the girl in the bookshop, La Fleur in his new breeches;—it is a succession of scenes. And though the flight of this erratic mind is as zigzag as a dragon-fly's, one cannot deny that this dragon-fly has some method in its flight, and chooses the flowers not at random but for some exquisite harmony or for some brilliant discord. We laugh, cry, sneer, sympathize by turns. We change from one emotion to its opposite in the twinkling of an eye. This light attachment to the accepted reality, this neglect of the orderly sequence of narrative, allows Sterne almost the licence of a poet. He can express ideas which ordinary novelists would have to ignore in language which, even if the ordinary novelist could command it, would look intolerably outlandish upon his page.

I walked up gravely to the window in my dusty black coat, and looking through the glass saw all the world in yellow, blue, and green, running at the ring of pleasure.—The old with broken lances, and in helmets which had lost their vizards—the young in armour bright which shone like gold, beplumed with each gay feather of the east—all—all tilting at it like fascinated knights in tournaments of yore for fame and love.

There are many passages of such pure poetry in Sterne. One

THE SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY

can cut them out and read them apart from the text, and yet—for Sterne was a master of the art of contrast—they lie harmoniously side by side on the printed page. His freshness, his buoyancy, his perpetual power to surprise and startle are the result of these contrasts. He leads us to the very brink of some deep precipice of the soul; we snatch one short glance into its depths; next moment, we are whisked round to look at the green pastures glowing on the other side.

If Sterne distresses us, it is for another reason. And here the blame rests partly at least upon the public—the public which had been shocked, which had cried out after the publication of *Tristram Shandy* that the writer was a cynic who deserved to be unfrocked. Sterne, unfortunately, thought it necessary to reply.

The world has imagined [he told Lord Shelburne] because I wrote *Tristram Shandy*, that I was myself more Shandean than I really ever was. . . . If it (*A Sentimental Journey*) is not thought a chaste book, mercy on them that read it, for they must have warm imaginations, indeed!

Thus in *A Sentimental Journey* we are never allowed to forget that Sterne is above all things sensitive, sympathetic, humane; that above all things he prizes the decencies, the simplicities of the human heart. And directly a writer sets out to prove himself this or that our suspicions are aroused. For the little extra stress he lays on the quality he desires us to see in him, coarsens it and over-paints it, so that instead of humour, we get farce, and instead of sentiment, sentimentality. Here, instead of being convinced of the tenderness of Sterne's heart—which in *Tristram Shandy* was never in question—we begin to doubt it. For we feel that Sterne is thinking not of the thing itself but of its effect upon our opinion of him. The beggars gather round him and he gives the *pauvre honteux* more than he had meant to. But his mind is not solely and simply on the beggars; his mind is partly on us, to see that we appreciate his goodness. Thus his conclusion, 'and I thought he thank'd me more than them all', placed, for more emphasis, at the end of the chapter, sickens us with its sweetness like the drop of pure sugar at the bottom of a cup. Indeed, the chief fault of *A Sentimental Journey* comes from Sterne's concern for our good opinion of his heart. It has a monotony about it, for all its

brilliance, as if the author had reined in the natural variety and vivacity of his tastes, lest they should give offence. The mood is subdued to one that is too uniformly kind, tender, and compassionate to be quite natural. One misses the variety, the vigour, the ribaldry of *Tristram Shandy*. His concern for his sensibility has blunted his natural sharpness, and we are called upon to gaze rather too long at modesty, simplicity, and virtue standing rather too still to be looked at.

But it is significant of the change of taste that has come over us that it is Sterne's sentimentality that offends us and not his immorality. In the eyes of the nineteenth century all that Sterne wrote was clouded by his conduct as husband and lover. Thackeray lashed him with his righteous indignation, and exclaimed that 'There is not a page of Sterne's writing but has something that were better away, a latent corruption—a hint as of an impure presence'. To us at the present time, the arrogance of the Victorian novelist seems at least as culpable as the infidelities of the eighteenth-century parson. Where the Victorians deplored his lies and his levities, the courage which turned all the rubs of life to laughter and the brilliance of the expression are far more apparent now.

Indeed *A Sentimental Journey*, for all its levity and wit, is based upon something fundamentally philosophic. It is true that it is a philosophy that was much out of fashion in the Victorian age—the philosophy of pleasure; the philosophy which holds that it is as necessary to behave well in small things as in big, which makes the enjoyment, even of other people, seem more desirable than their suffering. The shameless man had the hardihood to confess to 'having been in love with one princess or another almost all my life', and to add, 'and I hope I shall go on so till I die, being firmly persuaded that if ever I do a mean action, it must be in some interval betwixt one passion and another'. The wretch had the audacity to cry through the mouth of one of his characters, 'Mais vive la joie . . . Vive l'amour! et vive la bagatelle!' Clergyman though he was, he had the irreverence to reflect, when he watched the French peasants dancing, that he could distinguish an elevation of spirit, different from that which is the cause or the effect of simple jollity.—'In a word, I thought I beheld *Religion* mixing in the dance.'

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It was a daring thing for a clergyman to perceive a relationship between religion and pleasure. Yet it may, perhaps, excuse him that in his own case the religion of happiness had a great deal of difficulty to overcome. If you are no longer young, if you are deeply in debt, if your wife is disagreeable, if, as you racket about France in a post-chaise, you are dying of consumption all the time, then the pursuit of happiness is not so easy after all. Still, pursue it one must. One must pirouette about the world, peeping and peering, enjoying a flirtation here, bestowing a few coppers there, and sitting in whatever little patch of sunshine one can find. One must crack a joke, even if the joke is not altogether a decent one. Even in daily life one must not forget to cry 'Hail ye, small, sweet courtesies of life, for smooth do ye make the road of it!' One must—but enough of must; it is not a word that Sterne was fond of using. It is only when one lays the book aside and recalls its symmetry, its fun, its whole-hearted joy in all the different aspects of life, and the brilliant ease and beauty with which they are conveyed to us, that one credits the writer with a backbone of conviction to support him. Was not Thackeray's coward—the man who trifled so immorally with so many women and wrote love-letters on gilt-edged paper when he should have been lying on a sick-bed or writing sermons—was he not a stoic in his own way and a moralist, and a teacher? Most great writers are, after all. And that Sterne was a very great writer we cannot doubt.

The Humane Art¹

IF at this moment there is little chance of re-reading the sixteen volumes of the Paget Toynbee edition of Walpole's letters, while the prospect of possessing the magnificent Yale edition, where all the letters are to be printed with all the answers, becomes remote, this sound and sober biography of Horace Walpole by Mr. Ketton-Cremer may serve at least to inspire some random thoughts about Walpole and the humane art which owes its origin to the love of friends.

But, according to his latest biographer, Horace Walpole's letters were inspired not by the love of friends but by the love of posterity. He had meant to write the history of his own times. After twenty years he gave it up, and decided to write another kind of history—a history ostensibly inspired by friends but in fact written for posterity. Thus Mann stood for politics; Gray for literature; Montagu and Lady Ossory for society. They were pegs, not friends, each chosen because he was 'particularly connected . . . with one of the subjects about which he wished to enlighten and inform posterity'. But if we believe that Horace Walpole was a historian in disguise, we are denying his peculiar genius as a letter-writer. The letter-writer is no surreptitious historian. He is a man of short-range sensibility; he speaks not to the public at large but to the individual in private. All good letter-writers feel the drag of the face on the other side of the page and obey it—they take as much as they give. And Horace Walpole was no exception. There is the correspondence with Cole to prove it. We can see, in Mr. Lewis's edition, how the Tory parson develops the radical and the free-thinker in Walpole, how the middle-class professional man brings to the surface the aristocrat and the amateur. If Cole had been nothing but a peg*there would have been none of this echo, none of this mingling of voices. It is true that Walpole had an attitude and a style, and that his letters have a fine hard glaze upon them that preserves them, like the teeth of which he was so proud, from the little dents and rubs of familiarity. And of course—did he not insist

¹ Written in April, 1940

that his letters must be kept?—he sometimes looked over his page at the distant horizon, as Madame de Sévigné, whom he worshipped, did too, and imagined other people in times to come reading him. But that he allowed the featureless face of posterity to stand between him and the very voice and dress of his friends, how they looked and how they thought, the letters themselves with their perpetual variety deny. Open them at random. He is writing about politics—about Wilkes and Chatham and the signs of coming revolution in France; but also about a snuff-box; and a red riband; and about two very small black dogs. Voices upon the stairs interrupt him; more sightseers have come to see Caligula with his silver eyes; a spark from the fire has burnt the page he was writing; he cannot keep the pompous style any longer, nor mend a careless phrase, and so, flexible as an eel, he winds from high politics to living faces and the past and its memories—‘I tell you we should get together, and comfort ourselves with the brave days that we have known . . . I wished for you; the same scenes strike us both, and the same kind of visions has amused us both ever since we were born.’ It is not thus that a man writes when his correspondent is a peg and he is thinking of posterity.

Nor again was he thinking of the great public, which, in a very few years, would have paid him handsomely for the brilliant pages that he lavished upon his friends. Was it, then, the growth of writing as a paid profession, and the change which that change of focus brought with it that led, in the nineteenth century, to the decline of this humane art? Friendship flourished, nor was there any lack of gift. Who could have described a party more brilliantly than Macaulay or a landscape more exquisitely than Tennyson? But there, looking them full in the face, was the present moment—the great gluttonous public; and how can a writer turn at will from that impersonal stare to the little circle in the fire-lit room? Macaulay, writing to his sister, can no more drop his public manner than an actress can scrub her cheeks clean of paint and take her place naturally at the tea table. And Tennyson with his fear of publicity—‘While I live the owls, when I die the ghouls’—left nothing more succulent for the ghoul to feed upon than a handful of dry little notes that anybody could read, or print or put under glass in a museum. News and gossip, the sticks

and straws out of which the old letter-writer made his nest, have been snatched away. The wireless and the telephone have intervened. The letter-writer has nothing now to build with except what is most private; and how monotonous after a page or two the intensity of the very private becomes! We long that Keats even should cease to talk about Fanny, and that Elizabeth and Robert Browning should slam the door of the sick-room and take a breath of fresh air in an omnibus. Instead of letters posterity will have confessions, diaries, notebooks, like M. Gide's—hybrid books in which the writer talks in the dark to himself about himself for a generation yet to be born.

Horace Walpole suffered none of these drawbacks. If he was the greatest of English letter-writers it was not only thanks to his gifts but to his immense good fortune. He had his places to begin with—an income of £2,500 dropped yearly into his mouth from Collectorships and Usherships and was swallowed without a pang. ' . . . nor can I think myself', he wrote serenely, 'as a placeman a more useless or a less legal engrosser of part of the wealth of the nation than deans and prebendaries'—indeed the money was well invested. But besides those places, there was the other—his place in the very centre of the audience, facing the stage. There he could sit and see without being seen; contemplate without being called upon to act. Above all he was blessed in his little public—a circle that surrounded him with that warm climate in which he could live the life of incessant changes which is the breath of a letter-writer's existence. Besides the wit and the anecdote and the brilliant descriptions of masquerades and midnight revelries his friends drew from him something superficial yet profound, something changing yet entire—himself shall we call it in default of one word for that which friends elicit but the great public kills? From that sprang his immortality. For a self that goes on changing is a self that goes on living. As an historian he would have stagnated among historians. But as a letter-writer he buffets his way among the crowd, holding out a hand to each generation in turn—laughed at, criticized, despised, admired, but always in touch with the living. When Macaulay met him in October 1833, he struck that hand away in a burst of righteous indignation. 'His mind was a bundle of inconstant whims and affectations. His features were covered by mask

within mask'. His letters, like *pâté de foie gras*, owed their excellence 'to the diseases of the wretched animal which furnishes it'—such was Macaulay's greeting. And what greater boon can any writer ask than to be trounced by Lord Macaulay? We take the reputation he has gored, repair it and give it another spin and another direction—another lease of life. Opinion, as Mr. Ketton-Cremer says, is always changing about Walpole. 'The present age looks upon him with a more friendly eye' than the last. Is it that the present age is deafened with boom and blatancy? Does it hear in Walpole's low tones things that are more interesting, more penetrating, more true than can be said by the loud speakers? Certainly there is something wonderful to the present age in the sight of a whole human being—of a man so blessed that he could unfold every gift, every foible, whose long life spreads like a great lake reflecting houses and friends and wars and snuff-boxes and revolutions and lap-dogs, the great and the little, all intermingled, and behind them a stretch of the serene blue sky. 'Nor will [death] I think see me very unwilling to go with him, though I have no disappointments, but I came into the world so early, and have seen so much that I am satisfied.' Satisfied with his life in the flesh, he could be still more satisfied with his life in the spirit. Even now he is being collected and pieced together, letter and answer, himself and the reflections of of himself, so that whoever else may die, Horace Walpole is immortal. Whatever ruin may befall the map of Europe in years to come, there will still be people, it is consoling to reflect, to hang absorbed over the map of one human face.

Oliver Goldsmith¹

MOST writers, to hear them talk, believe in the existence of a spirit, called, according to the age they live in, the Muse, Genius or Inspiration; and it is at her command that they write. Unfortunately the historian is bound to perceive that the lady is not altogether single and solitary. She conceals behind her robes a whole bevy of understrappers—great ladies, earls, statesmen, booksellers, editors, publishers and common men and women, who control and guide no less surely than the Muse. Change is of their nature, and as ill-luck will have it they grow steadily less picturesque as time draws on. Sidney's Lady Pembroke, dreaming over her folios in the groves of Wilton, was no mean symbol of the goddess of poetry; but her place has been taken not by one man or woman but by a vast miscellaneous crowd, who want—they do not know exactly what. They must be amused and flattered; they must be fed on scraps and scandals and, finally, they must be sent sound asleep. And who is to be blamed if what they want they get?

The patron is always changing, and for the most part imperceptibly. But one such change in the middle of the eighteenth century took place in the full light of day, and has been recorded for us with his usual vivacity by Oliver Goldsmith, who was himself one of its victims:—

When the great Somers was at the helm [he wrote] patronage was fashionable among our nobility. . . . I have heard an old poet of that glorious age say, that a dinner with his lordship had procured him invitations for the whole week following; that an airing in his patron's chariot has supplied him with a citizen's coach on every future occasion. . . .

But this link [he continues] now seems entirely broken. Since the days of a certain prime minister of inglorious memory, the learned have been kept pretty much at a distance. A jockey or a laced player, supplies the place of the scholar, poet, or man of virtue. . . . He is called an author, and all know that an author is a thing only to be laughed at. His person, not his jest, becomes the mirth of the company. At his approach the most fat un-

¹ Written in February, 1934

thinking face brightens into malicious meaning. Even aldermen laugh, and revenge on him the ridicule which was lavished on their forefathers. . . .

To be laughed at by aldermen instead of riding in the chariots of statesmen was a change clearly not to the liking of a writer in whom we seem to perceive a spirit sensitive to ridicule and susceptible to the seduction of bloom-coloured velvet.

But the evils of the change went deeper. In the old days, he said, the patron was a man of taste and breeding, who could be trusted to see 'that all who deserved fame were in a capacity of attaining it'. Now in the mid-eighteenth century young men of brains were thrown to the mercy of the booksellers. Penny-a-lining came into fashion. Men of originality and spirit became docile drudges, voluminous hacks. They stuffed out their pages with platitudes. They 'write through volumes while they do not think through a page'. Solemnity and pomposity became the rule. 'On my conscience I believe we have all forgot to laugh in these days.' The new public fed greedily upon vast hunks of knowledge. They demanded huge encyclopaedias, soulless compilations, which were 'carried on by different writers, cemented into one body, and concurring in the same design by the mediation of the booksellers'. All this was much to the disgust of a man who wrote clearly, shortly and outspokenly by nature; who held that 'Were angels to write books, they never would write folios'; who felt himself among the angels but knew that the age of the angels was over. The chariots and the earls had winged their way back to Heaven; in their place stood a stout tradesman demanding so many lines of prose to be delivered by Saturday night without fail or the wretched hack would go without dinner on Sunday.

Goldsmith did his share of the work manfully, as a glance at the list of his works shows. But he was to find that the change from the Earl to the bookseller was not without its advantages. A new public had come into existence with new demands. Everybody was turning reader. The writer, if he had ceased to dine with the nobility, had become the friend and instructor of a vast congregation of ordinary men and women. They demanded essays as well as encyclopaedias. They allowed their writers a freedom which the old aristocracy had never permitted. As Goldsmith said, the writer could now 'refuse invitations to dinner'; he 'could

wear just such clothes as men generally wear' and 'he can bravely assert the dignity of independence'. Goldsmith by temper and training was peculiarly fitted to take advantage of the new state of things. He was a man of lively intelligence and outspoken good sense. He had the born writer's gift of being in touch with the thing itself and not with the outer husks of words. There was something shrewd and objective in his temper which fitted him admirably to preach little sermons and wing little satires. If he had little education and no learning, he had a large and varied stock of experience to draw on. He had knocked about the world. He had seen Leyden and Paris and Padua as a foot traveller sees famous cities. But his travels, far from plunging him into reverie or giving him a passion for the solitudes and sublimities of nature, had served to make him relish human society better and had proved how slight are the differences between man and man. He preferred to call himself a Citizen of the World rather than an Englishman. 'We are now become so much Englishmen, Frenchmen, Dutchmen, Spaniards or Germans that we are no longer . . . members of that grand society which comprehends the whole of human kind.' He insisted that we should pool our discoveries and learn from each other.

It is this detached attitude and width of view that give Goldsmith his peculiar flavour as an essayist. Other writers pack their pages fuller and bring us into closer touch with themselves. Goldsmith, on the other hand, keeps just on the edge of the crowd so that we can hear what the common people are saying and note their humours. That is why his essays, even the early ones, in *The Bee*, make such good reading. That is why it is just and fitting that *The Bee* and *The Citizen of the World*¹ should be reprinted again today, at a very modest price; and why Mr. Church should once more draw our attention in an excellent introduction to the unfaded merits of a book printed so long ago as 1762. The Citizen is still a most vivacious companion as he takes his walk from Charing Cross to Ludgate Hill. The streets are lit up for the Battle of Minden, and he pokes fun at the parochial patriotism of the English. He hears the shoemaker scolding his wife and foreboding what will become of shoemakers

¹ *The Citizen of the World and the Bee*. By Oliver Goldsmith. Introduction by Richard Church.

'if Mounseers in wooden shoes come among us . . . when perhaps Madam Pompadour herself might have shoes scopped out of an old pear tree'; he hears the waiter at Ashley's punch house boasting to the company how if he were Secretary of State he would take Paris and plant the English standard on the Bastille. He peeps into St. Paul's and marvels at the curious lack of reverence shown by the English at their worship. He reflects that rags 'which might be valued at half a string of copper money in China' yet needed a fleet and an army to win them. He marvels that the French and English are at war simply because people like their muffs edged with fur and must therefore kill each other and seize a country 'belonging to people who were in possession from time immemorial'. Shrewdly and sarcastically he casts his eye, as he saunters on, upon the odd habits and sights that the English are so used to that they no longer see them. Indeed he could scarcely have chosen a method better calculated to make the new public aware of itself or one better suited to the nature of his own genius. If Goldsmith stood still he could be as flat, though not as solemn, as any of the folio-makers who were his aversion. Here, however, he must keep moving; he must pass rapidly under review all kinds of men and customs and speak his mind on them. And here his novelist's gift stood him in good stead. If he thinks he thinks in the round. An idea at once dresses itself up in flesh and blood and becomes a human being. Beau Tibbs comes to life: Vauxhall Gardens is bustling with people: the writer's garret is before us with its broken windows and the spider's web in the corner. He has a perpetual instinct to make concrete, to bring into being.

Perhaps it was the novelist's gift that made him a little impatient with essay-writing. The shortness of the essay made people think it superficial. 'I could have made them more metaphysical had I thought fit,' he replied. But it is doubtful if he was prevented by circumstances from any depth of speculation. The real trouble was that Beau Tibbs and Vauxhall Gardens asked to be given a longer lease of life, but the end of the column was reached; down came the shears, and a new subject must be broached next week. The natural outlet, as Goldsmith found, was the novel. In those freer pages he had room to give his characters space to walk round and display themselves. Yet *The Vicar of Wakefield* keeps

some of the characteristics that distinguish the more static art of the essayist. The characters are not quite free to go their own ways; they must come back at the tug of the string to illustrate the moral. This necessity is the stranger to us because good and bad are no longer so positively white and black; the art of the moralist is out of fashion in fiction. But Goldsmith not only believed in blackness and whiteness: he believed—perhaps one belief depends upon the other—that goodness will be rewarded, and vice punished. It is a doctrine, it may strike us when we read *The Vicar of Wakefield*, which imposes some restrictions on the novelist. There is no need of the mixed, of the twisted, of the profound. Lightly tinted, broadly shaded with here a foible, there a peccadillo, the characters of the Primroses are like those tropical fish who seem to have only backbones but no other organs to darken the transparency of their flesh. Our sympathies are not put upon the rack. Daughters may be seduced, houses burnt, and good men sent to prison, yet since the world is a perfectly balanced place, let it lurch as it likes, it is bound to settle into equilibrium in the long run. The most hardened of sinners—here Goldsmith stops characteristically to point out the evils of the prison system—will take to cutting tobacco stoppers if given the chance and thus enter the straight path of virtue again. Such assumptions stopped certain avenues of thought and imagination. But the limitation had its advantages; he could give all his mind to the story. All is clear, related, and uncrowded. He knew precisely what to leave out. Thus, once we begin to read we read on, not to reach the end, but to enjoy the present moment. We cannot dismember this small complete world. It hems us in, it surrounds us. We ask nothing better than to sit in the sun on the hawthorn bank and sing ‘Barbara Allen’, or Johnny Armstrong’s last good night. Shades of violence and wrong can scarcely trespass here. But the scene is saved from insipidity by Goldsmith’s tart eighteenth-century humour. One advantage of having a settled code of morals is that you know exactly what to laugh at.

Yet there are passages in the *Vicar* which give us pause. ‘Fudge! fudge! fudge!’ Burchell exclaims, and it seems that, in order to get the full effect of the scene, we should see it in the flesh. There is no margin of suggestion in this clear prose; it creates no populous and teeming silence which would be broken

by the physical presence of the actors. Indeed, when we turn from Goldsmith's novel to Goldsmith's plays his characters seem to gain vigour and identity by standing before us in the round. They can say everything they have to say without the intervention of the novelist. This may be taken, if we choose, as proof that they have nothing of extreme subtlety to say. Yet Goldsmith did himself a wrong when he followed the old habit of labelling his people with names—Croker, Lofty, Richlands—which seem to allow them but one quality apiece. His observation, trained in the finer discriminations of fiction, worked much more cunningly than the names suggest. Bodies and hearts are attached to these signboard faces; wit of the true spontaneous sort bubbles from their lips. He stood, of course, at the very point where comedy can flourish, as remote from the tragic violence of the Elizabethans as from the minute maze of modern psychology. The 'humours' of the Elizabethan stage had fined themselves into characters. Convention and conviction and an unquestioned standard of values seem to support the large, airy world of his invention. Nothing could be more amusing than *She Stoops to Conquer*—one might even go so far as to say that amusement of so pure a quality will never come our way again. It demands too rare a combination of conditions. Nothing is too far-fetched or fantastical to dry up the life blood in the characters themselves; we taste the double pleasure of a comic situation in which living people are the actors. It may be true that the amusement is not of the highest order. We have not gained a deeper understanding of human oddity and frailty when we have laughed to tears over the predicament of a good lady who has been driven round her house for two hours in the darkness. To mistake a private house for an inn is not a disaster that reveals the hidden depths or the highest dignity of human nature. But these are questions that fade out in the enjoyment of reading—an enjoyment which is much more composite than the simple word amusement can cover. When a thing is perfect of its kind we cannot stop, under that spell, to pick our flower to pieces. There is a unity about it which forbids us to dismember it.

Yet even so, in the midst of this harmony and completeness we hear now and again another note. 'But they are dead, and their sorrows are over.' 'Life at its greatest and best is but a froward

child, that must be humoured and coaxed a little till it falls asleep, and then all the care is over.' 'No sounds were heard but of the shrilling cock, and the deep-mouthed watch-dog at hollow distance.' A poet seems hidden on the other side of the page anxious to concentrate its good-humoured urbanity into a phrase or two of deeper meaning. And Goldsmith was a true poet, even though he could not afford to entertain the muse for long. 'And thou, sweet Poetry,' he exclaimed,

*My shame in crowds, my solitary pride,
Thou source of all my bliss, and all my woe,
That found'st me poor at first, and keep'st me so;*

—that 'dear charming nymph' fluttered her wings about him even if she made no very long stay. It is poetry of course at one remove from prose: poetry using only the greys and browns upon her palette: poetry clicking her heels together at the end of the line as though executing the steps of a courtly dance: poetry with such a sediment of good sense that it naturally crystallizes itself into epigram:

And to party gave up what was meant for mankind;

or

*How small of all that human hearts endure
That part which laws or kings can cause or cure.*

The argument of his poems has already been stated in prose. Kingdoms grow to an unwieldy size; empires spread ruin round them; nothing is more to be valued than 'a happy human face'; power and independence are to be dreaded. It has all been said before; but here the village is Auburn; the land is Ireland; all is made concrete and visualized, given a voice and a name. The world of Goldsmith's poetry is, of course, a flat and eyeless world; swains sport with nymphs, and the deep is finny. But pathos is the more moving in the midst of reserve, and the poet's sudden emotion tells the more when it is obviously not good manners to talk about oneself. If it is objected that Goldsmith's imagination is too narrowly and purely domestic, that he ignores all the rubs and struggles of life to dwell upon

*. . . the gentler morals, such as play
Through life's more cultured walks, and charm the way,*

it is also undeniable that what he loves is not an artificial and foppish refinement. 'Those calm desires that ask'd but little room' are the pith of life, the essence that he has pressed out from the turbulent and unsatisfying mass.

Yet Goldsmith has a peculiar reticence which forbids us to dwell with him in complete intimacy. It is partly no doubt that he has no such depths to reveal as some of our essayists—the solitudes and sublimities are not for him, rather the graces and amenities. And also we are kept at arm's length by the urbanity of his style, just as good manners confer impersonality upon the well-bred. But there may be another reason for his reserve. Lamb, Hazlitt, Montaigne talk openly about themselves because their faults are not small ones; Goldsmith was reserved because his foibles are the kind that men conceal. Nobody at least can read Goldsmith in the mass without noticing how frequently, yet how indirectly, certain themes recur—dress, ugliness, awkwardness, poverty and the fear of ridicule. It is as if the genial man were haunted by some private dread, as if he were conscious that besides the angel there lived in him a less reputable companion, resembling perhaps Poor Poll. It is only necessary to open Boswell to make sure. There, at once, we see our serene and mellifluous writer in the flesh. 'His person was short, his countenance coarse and vulgar, his deportment that of a scholar awkwardly affecting the easy gentleman.' With touch upon touch the unprepossessing portrait is built up. We are shown Goldsmith writhing upon the sofa in an agony of jealousy; Goldsmith thrusting himself into the talk and floundering on 'without knowing how to get off': Goldsmith full of vanities and jealousies: Goldsmith dressing up his ugly pock-marked body in a smart bloom-coloured coat. The portrait is painted without sympathy save, indeed, of that inverted kind which comes from knowing from your own experience the sufferings which you describe. Boswell, too, was jealous, and seized upon his sitter's foibles with the malicious insight of a rival.

Yet, like all Boswell's portraits, it has the breath of life in it. He brings the other Goldsmith to the surface—he combines them both. He proves that the silver-tongued writer was no simple soul, gently floating through life from the honeysuckle to the hawthorn hedge. On the contrary, he was a complex man, a

man full of troubles, without 'settled principle'; who lived from hand to mouth and from day to day; who wrote his loveliest sentences in a garret under pressure of poverty. And yet, so oddly are human faculties combined, he had only to take his pen and he was revenged upon Boswell, upon the fine gentleman who sneered at him, upon his own ugly body and stumbling tongue. He had only to write and all was clear and melodious; he had only to write and he was among the angels, speaking with a silver tongue in a world where all is ordered, rational, and serene.

The Historian and 'The Gibbon'¹

‘YET, upon the whole, the *History of the Decline and Fall* seems to have struck root, both at home and abroad, and may, perhaps, a hundred years hence still continue to be abused.’ So Gibbon wrote in the calm confidence of immortality; and let us confirm him in his own opinion of his book by showing, in the first place, that it has one quality of permanence—it still excites abuse. Few people can read the whole of the *Decline and Fall* without admitting that some chapters have glided away without leaving a trace; that many pages are no more than a concussion of sonorous sounds; and that innumerable figures have passed across the stage without printing even their names upon our memories. We seem, for hours on end, mounted on a celestial rocking-horse which, as it gently sways up and down, remains rooted to a single spot. In the soporific idleness thus induced we recall with regret the vivid partisanship of Macaulay, the fitful and violent poetry of Carlyle. We suspect that the vast fame with which the great historian is surrounded is one of those vague diffusions of acquiescence which gather when people are too busy, too lazy, or too timid to see things for themselves. And to justify this suspicion it is easy to gather pomposities of diction—the Church has become ‘the sacred edifice’; and sentences so stereotyped that they chime like bells—‘destroyed the confidence’ must be followed by ‘and excited the resentment’; while characters are daubed in with single epithets like ‘the vicious’ or ‘the virtuous’, and are so crudely jointed that they seem capable only of the extreme antics of puppets dangling from a string. It is easy, in short, to suppose that Gibbon owed some part of his fame to the gratitude of journalists on whom he bestowed the gift of a style singularly open to imitation and well adapted to invest little ideas with large bodies. And then we turn to the book again, and to our amazement we find that the rocking-horse has left the ground; we are mounted on a winged steed; we are sweeping in wide circles through the air and below us Europe unfolds; the ages change and pass; a miracle has taken place.

¹ Written in March, 1937

But miracle is not a word to use in writing of Gibbon. If miracle there was it lay in the inexplicable fact which Gibbon, who seldom stresses a word, himself thought worthy of italics: '*. . . I know by experience, that from my early youth I aspired to the character of an historian.*' Once that seed was planted so mysteriously in the sickly boy whose erudition amazed his tutor there was more of the rational than of the miraculous in the process by which that gift was developed and brought to fruition. Nothing, in the first place, could have been more cautious, more deliberate, and more far-sighted than Gibbon's choice of a subject. A historian he had to be; but historian of what? The history of the Swiss was rejected; the history of Florence was rejected; for a long time he played with the idea of a life of Sir Walter Raleigh. Then that, too, was rejected and for reasons that are extremely illuminating:

. . . I should shrink with terror from the modern history of England, where every character is a problem, and every reader a friend or an enemy; where a writer is supposed to hoist a flag of party, and is devoted to damnation by the adverse faction. . . . I must embrace a safer and more extensive theme.

But once found, how was he to treat the distant, the safe, the extensive theme? An attitude, a style had to be adopted; one presumably that generalized, since problems of character were to be avoided; that abolished the writer's personality, since he was not dealing with his own times and contemporary questions; that was rhythmical and fluent, rather than abrupt and intense, since vast stretches of time had to be covered, and the reader carried smoothly through many folios of print.

At last the problem was solved; the fusion was complete; matter and manner became one; we forget the style, and are only aware that we are safe in the keeping of a great artist. He is able to make us see what he wants us to see and in the right proportions. Here he compresses; there he expands. He transposes, emphasizes, omits in the interests of order and drama. The features of the individual faces are singularly conventionalized. Here are none of those violent gestures and unmistakable voices that fill the pages of Carlyle and Macaulay with living human beings who are related to ourselves. There are no Whigs and Tories here; no eternal verities and implacable destinies. Time

has cut off those quick reactions that make us love and hate. The innumerable figures are suffused in the equal blue of the far distance. They rise and fall and pass away without exciting our pity or our anger. But if the figures are small, they are innumerable; if the scene is dim it is vast. Armies wheel; hordes of barbarians are destroyed; forests are huge and dark; processions are splendid; altars rise and fall; one dynasty succeeds another. The richness, the variety of the scene absorb us. He is the most resourceful of entertainers. Without haste or effort he swings his lantern where he chooses. If sometimes the size of the whole is oppressive, and the unemphatic story monotonous, suddenly in the flash of a phrase a detail is lit up: we see the monks 'in the lazy gloom of their convents'; statues become unforgettably 'that inanimate people'; the 'gilt and variegated armour' shines out; the splendid names of kings and countries are sonorously intoned; or the narrative parts and a scene opens:

By the order of Probus, a great quantity of large trees, torn up by the roots, were transplanted into the midst of the circus. The spacious and shady forest was immediately filled with a thousand ostriches, a thousand stags, a thousand fallow deer, a thousand wild boars; and all this variety of game was abandoned to the riotous impetuosity of the multitude. . . . The air was continually refreshed by the playing of fountains, and profusely impregnated by the grateful scent of aromatics. In the centre of the edifice, the arena, or stage, was strewed with the finest sand, and successively assumed the most different forms. At one moment it seemed to rise out of the earth, like the garden of Hesperides, and was afterwards broken into the rocks and caverns of Thrace. . . .

But it is only when we come to compress and dismember one of Gibbon's pictures that we realize how carefully the parts have been chosen, how firmly the sentences, composed after a certain number of turns round the room and then tested by the ear and only then written down, adhere together.

But these are qualities, it might be said, that belong to the historical novelist—to Scott or to Flaubert. And Gibbon was a historian so religiously devoted to the truth that he felt an aspersion upon his accuracy as an aspersion upon his character. Flights of notes at the bottom of the page check his pageants and

verify his characters. Thus they have a different quality from scenes and characters composed from a thousand hints and suggestions in the freedom of the imagination. They are inferior, perhaps, in subtlety and in intensity. On the other hand, as Gibbon pointed out, 'The Cyropaedia is vague and languid; the Anabasis circumstantial and animated. Such is the eternal difference between fiction and truth.'

The imagination of the novelist must often fail; but the historian can repose himself upon fact. And even if those facts are sometimes dubious and capable of more than one interpretation, they bring the reason into play and widen our range of interest. The vanished generations, invisible separately, have collectively spun round them intricate laws, erected marvellous structures of ceremony and belief. These can be described, analysed, recorded. The interest with which we follow him in his patient and impartial examination has an excitement peculiar to itself. History may be, as he tells us, 'little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind'; but we seem, at least, as we read him raised above the tumult and the chaos into a clear and rational air.

The victories and the civilization of Constantine no longer influence the state of Europe; but a considerable portion of the globe still retains the impression which it received from the conversion of that monarch; and the ecclesiastical institutions of his reign are still connected, by an indissoluble chain, with the opinions, the passions, and the interests of the present generation.

He is not merely a master of the pageant and the story; he is also the critic and the historian of the mind.

It is here of course that we become conscious of the idiosyncrasy and of the limitations of the writer. Just as we know that Macaulay was a nineteenth-century Whig, and Carlyle a Scottish peasant with the gift of prophecy, so we know that Gibbon was rooted in the eighteenth century and indelibly stamped with its character and his own. Gradually, stealthily, with a phrase here, a gibe there, the whole solid mass is leavened with the peculiar quality of his temperament. Shades of meaning reveal themselves; the pompous language becomes delicate and exact. Sometimes a

phrase is turned edgewise, so that as it slips with the usual suavity into its place it leaves a scratch. 'He was even destitute of a sense of honour, which so frequently supplies the sense of public virtue.' Or the solemn rise and fall of the text above is neatly diminished by the demure particularity of a note. 'The ostrich's neck is three feet long, and composed of seventeen vertebrae. See Buffon. Hist. Naturelle.' The infallibility of historians is gravely mocked. '... their knowledge will appear gradually to increase, as their means of information must have diminished, a circumstance which frequently occurs in historical disquisitions.' Or we are urbane asked to reflect how,

in our present state of existence, the body is so inseparably connected with the soul, that it seems to be to our interest to taste, with innocence and moderation, the enjoyments of which that faithful companion is susceptible.

The infirmities of that faithful companion provide him with a fund of perpetual amusement. Sex, for some reason connected, perhaps, with his private life, always excites a demure smile:

Twenty-two acknowledged concubines, and a library of sixty-two thousand volumes, attested the variety of his inclinations; and from the productions which he left behind him, it appears that the former as well as the latter were designed for use rather than for ostentation.

The change upon such phrases is rung again and again. Few virgins or matrons, nuns or monks leave his pages with their honour entirely unscathed. But his most insidious raillery, his most relentless reason, are directed, of course, against the Christian religion.

Fanaticism, asceticism, superstition were naturally antipathetic to him. Wherever he found them, in life or in religion, they roused his contempt and derision. The two famous chapters in which he examined 'the human causes of the progress and establishment of Christianity', though inspired by the same love of truth which in other connexions excited the admiration of scholars, roused great scandal at the time. Even the eighteenth century, that 'age of light and liberty', was not entirely open to the voice of reason. 'How many souls have his writings polluted!' Hannah More exclaimed when she heard of his death. 'Lord preserve others

from their contagion!' In such circumstances irony was the obvious weapon; the pressure of public opinion forced him to be covert, not open. And irony is a dangerous weapon; it easily becomes sidelong and furtive; the ironist seems to be darting a poisoned tongue from a place of concealment. However grave and temperate Gibbon's irony at its best, however searching his logic and robust his contempt for the cruelty and intolerance of superstition, we sometimes feel, as he pursues his victim with incessant scorn, that he is a little limited, a little superficial, a little earthy, a little too positively and imperturbably a man of the eighteenth century and not of our own.

But then he is Gibbon; and even historians, as Professor Bury reminds us, have to be themselves. History 'is in the last resort somebody's image of the past, and the image is conditioned by the mind and experience of the person who forms it'. Without his satire, his irreverence, his mixture of sedateness and slyness, of majesty and mobility, and above all that belief in reason which pervades the whole book and gives it unity, an implicit if unspoken message, the *Decline and Fall* would be the work of another man. It would be the work indeed of two other men. For as we read we are perpetually creating another book, perceiving another figure. The sublime person of 'the historian' as the Sheffields called him is attended by a companion whom they called, as if he were the solitary specimen of some extinct race, 'the Gibbon'. The Historian and the Gibbon go hand in hand. But it is not easy to draw even a thumbnail sketch of this strange being because the autobiography, or rather the six autobiographies, compose a portrait of such masterly completeness and authority that it defies our attempts to add to it. And yet no autobiography is ever final; there is always something for the reader to add from another angle.

There is the body, in the first place—the body with all those little physical peculiarities that the outsider sees and uses to interpret what lies within. The body in Gibbon's case was ridiculous—prodigiously fat, enormously top-heavy, precariously balanced upon little feet upon which he spun round with astonishing alacrity. Like Goldsmith he over-dressed, and for the same reason perhaps—to supply the dignity which nature denied him. But unlike Goldsmith, his ugliness caused him no embarrass-

ment; or, if so, he had mastered it completely. He talked incessantly, and in sentences composed as carefully as his writing. To the sharp and irreverent eyes of contemporaries his vanity was perceptible and ridiculous; but it was only on the surface. There was something hard and muscular in the obese little body which turned aside the sneers of the fine gentlemen. He had roughed it, not only in the Hampshire Militia, but among his equals. He had supped 'at little tables covered with a napkin, in the middle of a coffee room, upon a bit of cold meat or a Sandwich', with twenty or thirty of the first men in the kingdom, before he retired to rule supreme over the first families of Lausanne. It was in London, among the distractions of society and politics, that he achieved that perfect poise, that perfect balance between work, society, and the pleasures of the senses which composed his wholly satisfactory existence. And the balance had not been arrived at without a struggle. He was sickly; he had a spendthrift for a father; he was expelled from Oxford; his love affair was thwarted; he was short of money and had none of the advantages of birth. But he turned everything to profit. From his lack of health he learnt the love of books; from the barrack and the guardroom he learnt to understand the common people; from his exile he learnt the smallness of the English cloister; and from poverty and obscurity how to cultivate the amenities of human intercourse.

At last it seemed as if life itself were powerless to unseat this perfect master of her uncertain paces. The final buffet—the loss of his sinecure—was turned to supreme advantage; a perfect house, a perfect friend, a perfect society at once placed themselves at his service, and without loss of time or temper Gibbon entered a post-chaise with Caplin his valet and Muff his dog and bowled over Westminster Bridge to finish his history and enjoy his maturity in circumstances that were ideal.

But as we run over the familiar picture there is something that eludes us. It may be that we have not been able to find out anything for ourselves. Gibbon has always been before us. His self-knowledge was consummate; he had no illusions either about himself or about his work. He had chosen his part and he played it to perfection. Even that characteristic attitude, with his snuff-box in his hand and his body stretched out, he had noted himself,

and perhaps he had adopted it as consciously as he observed it. But it is his silence that is most baffling. Even in the letters, where he drops the Historian and shortens himself now and then to 'the Gib', there are long pauses when nothing is heard even at Sheffield Place of what is going on in the study at Lausanne.

The artist after all is a solitary being. Twenty years spent in the society of the *Decline and Fall* are twenty years spent in solitary communion with distant events, with intricate problems of arrangement, with the minds and bodies of the dead. Much that is important to other people loses its importance; the perspective is changed when the eyes are fixed not upon the foreground but upon the mountains, not upon a living woman but upon 'my other wife, the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*'. And it is difficult, after casting firm sentences that will withstand the tread of time, to say, 'in three words, I am alone'. It is only now and then that we catch a phrase that has not been stylized, or see a little picture that he has not been able to include in the majestic design. For example, when Lord Sheffield bursts out in his downright way, 'You are a right good friend . . .', we see the obese little man impetuously and impulsively hoisting himself into a post-chaise and crossing a Europe ravaged by revolution to comfort a widower. And again when the old stepmother at Bath takes up her pen and quavers out a few uncomposed and unliterary sentences we see him:

I truly rejoice, & congratulate you on your being once more safely arrived in your native Country. I wish'd to tell you so yesterday, but the joy your letter gave would not suffer my hand to be steady enough to write. . . . Many has been the disappointments I have borne with fortitude, but the fear of having my last and only friend torn from me was very near oversetting my reason. . . . Madame Ely and Mrs. Bonfoy are here. Mrs. Holroyd has probably told you that Miss Gould is now Mrs. Horneck. I wish she had been Mrs. Gibbon . . .

so the old lady rambles on and for a moment we see him as in a cracked mirror held in a trembling hand. For a moment, a cloud crosses that august countenance. It was true. He had sometimes on returning home in the evening, sighed for a companion. He had sometimes felt that 'domestic solitude . . . is a comfortless state'. He had conceived the romantic idea of adopting and

educating a young female relative called Charlotte. But there were difficulties; the idea was abandoned. Then the cloud drifts away; common sense, indomitable cheerfulness return; once more the serene figure of the historian emerges triumphant. He had every reason to be content. The great building was complete; the mountain was off his breast; the slave was freed from the toil of the oar.

And he was by no means exhausted. Other tasks less laborious, perhaps more delightful, lay before him. His love of literature was unsated; his love of life—of the young, of the innocent, of the gay—was unblunted. It was the faithful companion, the body, unfortunately, that failed him. But his composure was unshaken. He faced death with an equanimity that speaks well for 'the profane virtues of sincerity and moderation'. And as he sank into a sleep that was probably eternal, he could remember with satisfaction the view across the plain to the stupendous mountains beyond; the white acacia that grew beside the study window, and the great work which, he was not wrong in thinking, will immortalize his name.

Reflections at Sheffield Place¹

THE great ponds at Sheffield Place at the right season of the year are bordered with red, white, and purple reflections, for rhododendrons are massed upon the banks and when the wind passes over the real flowers the water flowers shake and break into each other. But there, in an opening among the trees, stands a great fantastic house, and since it was there that John Holroyd, Lord Sheffield, lived, since it was there that Gibbon stayed, another reflection imposes itself upon the water trance. Did the historian himself ever pause here to cast a phrase, and if so what words would he have found for those same floating flowers? Great lord of language as he was, no doubt he filled his mind from the fountain of natural beauty. The exactions of the *Decline and Fall* meant, of course, the death and dismissal of many words deserving of immortal life. Order and seemliness were drastically imposed. It was a question, he reflected, 'whether some flowers of fancy, some grateful errors, have not been eradicated with the weeds of prejudice'. Still his mind was a whispering gallery of words; the famous 'barefooted friars' singing vespers may have been a recollection of Marlowe's 'And ducke as low as any bare-foot Fryar', murmuring in the background. Be this as it may, to consider what Gibbon would have said had he seen the rhododendrons reflected in the water is an idle exercise, for in his day, late in the eighteenth century, a girl who looked out of the window of Sheffield Place saw not rhododendrons 'but four young swans . . . now entirely grey' floating upon the water. Moreover, it is unlikely that he ever bestirred himself to walk in the grounds. 'Gib', that same girl, Maria Josepha Holroyd, remarked, 'is a mortal enemy to any person taking a walk, and he is so frigid that he makes us sit by, a good roasting Christmas fire every evening.' There he sat in the summer evening talking endlessly, delightfully, in the best of spirits, for no place was more like home to him than Sheffield Place, and he looked upon the Holroyds as his own flesh and blood.

Seen through Maria's eyes Gibbon—she called him sometimes 'Gib', sometimes 'le grand Gibbon', sometimes 'The Historian'—looked different from Gibbon seen by himself. In 1792 she was a girl of twenty-one; he was a man of fifty-five. To him she was 'the tall and blooming Maria'; 'the soft and stately Maria'; a niece by adoption, whose manners he could correct; whose future he could forecast—"That establishment must be splendid; that life must be happy"; whose style, especially one metaphor about the Rhine escaping its banks, he could approve. But to her he was often an object of ridicule; he was so fat; such a figure of fun 'waddling across the room whenever she [Madame da Silva] appeared, and sitting by her and looking at her, till his round eyes run down with water'; rather testy, too, an old bachelor, who lived like clockwork and hated to have his plans upset; but at the same time, she had to admit, the most delightful of talkers. That summer night he drew out the two young men who were staying in the house, Fred North and Mr. Douglas, and made them far more entertaining than they would have been without him. 'It was impossible to have selected three Beaux who could have been more agreeable, whether their conversation was trifling or serious', whether they talked about Greek and Latin or turtle soup. For that summer Mr. Gibbon was 'raving' about turtles and wanted Lord Sheffield to have one brought from London. Maria's gaze rested upon him with a mixture of amusement and respect; but it did not rest upon him alone. For not only were Fred North and Mr. Douglas in the room, and the swans on the pond outside and the woods; but soldiers were tramping past the Park gates; the Prince himself was holding a review; they were going over to inspect the camp; Mr. Gibbon and Aunt Serena in the post-chaise; she, if only her father would let her, on horseback. But the sight of her father suggested other cares; he was wildly hospitable; he had asked the Prince and the Duke to stay; and as her mother was dead, all the catering, all the entertaining, fell upon her. There was too something in her father's face that made her look at Mr. Gibbon as if for support; he was the only man who could influence her father; who could bring him to reason; who could check his extravagance, restrain his . . . But here she paused, for there was some weakness in her father's character that could not be put into plain language by

a daughter. At any rate she was very glad when he married a second time 'for I feel delighted to think when sooner or later troubles come, as we who know the gentleman must fear . . .'. Whatever frailty of her father's she hinted at, Mr. Gibbon was the only one of his friends whose good sense could restrain him.

The relation between the Peer and the Historian was very singular. They were devoted. But what tie was it that attached the downright, self-confident, perhaps loose-living man of the world to the suave, erudite sedentary historian?—the attraction of opposites perhaps. Sheffield, with his finger in every pie, his outright, downright man-of-the-world's good sense, supplied the historian with what he must sometimes have needed—someone to call him 'you damned beast', someone to give him a solid footing on English earth. In Parliament Gibbon was dumb; in love he was ineffective. But his friend Holroyd was a member of a dozen committees; before one wife was two years in the grave he had married another. If it is true that friends are chosen partly in order to live lives that we cannot live in our own persons, then we can understand why the Peer and the Historian were devoted; why the great writer divested himself of his purple language and wrote racy colloquial English to Sheffield; why Sheffield curbed his extravagance and restrained his passions in deference to Gibbon; why Gibbon crossed Europe in a post-chaise to console Sheffield for his wife's death; and why Sheffield, though always busied with a thousand affairs of his own, yet found time to manage Gibbon's tangled money matters; and was now indeed engaged in arranging the business of Aunt Hester's legacy.

Considering Hester Gibbon's low opinion of her nephew and her own convictions it was surprising that she had left him anything at all. To her Gibbon stood for all those lusts of the flesh, all those vanities of the intellect which many years previously she had renounced. Many years ago, many years before the summer night when they sat round the fire in the Library and discussed Latin and Greek and turtle soup, Hester Gibbon had put all such vanities behind her. She had left Putney and the paternal house to follow her brother's tutor William Law to his home in Northamptonshire. There in the village of King's Cliffe she lived with him trying to understand his mystic philosophy, more successfully putting it into practice; teaching the ignorant; living

frugally; feeding beggars; spending her substance on charity. There at last, for she made no haste to join the Saints as her nephew observed, at the age of eighty-six she lay by Law's side in his grave; while Mrs. Hutcheson, who had shared his house but not his love, lay in an inferior position at their feet. Every difference that could divide two human beings seems to have divided the aunt from the nephew; and yet they had something in common. The suburban world of Putney had called her mad because she believed too much; the learned world of divinity had called him wicked because he believed too little. Both aunt and nephew found it impossible to hit off the exact degree of scepticism and belief which the world holds reasonable. And this very difference perhaps had not been without its effect upon the nephew. When he was a young man practising the graces which were to conciliate the world he adored, his eccentric aunt had roused his ridicule. 'Her dress and figure exceed anything we had at the masquerade; her language and ideas belong to the last century', he wrote. In fact, though his urbanity never deserted him in writing to her—he was her heir-at-law we are reminded—his comments to others upon the Saint, the Holy Matron of Northamptonshire, as he called her, were of an acutely ironical kind; nor did he fail to note maliciously those little frailties—her anger when Mrs. Hutcheson forgot her in her will; her reprehensible desire to borrow from a nephew whom she refused to meet—which were to him so marked a feature of the saintly temper, so frequent an accompaniment of a mind clouded by enthusiasm. As Maria Holroyd observed, and others have observed after her, the great historian had a round mouth but an extremely pointed tongue; and—who knows?—it may have been Aunt Hester herself who first sharpened that weapon. Edward's father, for instance, may have talked about William Law, his tutor—an admirable man of course; far too great a man to have been the tutor of a scatter-brained spendthrift like himself; still William Law had made himself very comfortable at the Gibbon's house in Putney, had filled it with his own friends; had allowed Hester to fall passionately in love with him, but had never married her, since marriage was against his creed—had only accepted her devotion and her income, conduct which in another might have been condemned—so he may have gossiped.

From very early days at any rate Edward must have had a private view of the eccentricities of the unworldly, of the inconsistencies of the devout. At last, however, Aunt Hester, as her nephew irreverently remarked, had 'gone to sing Hallelujahs'. She lay with William Law in the grave, after a life of what ecstasies, of what tortures, of what jealousies, of what satisfactions who can say? The only fact that was certain was that she had left one hundred pounds and an estate at Newhaven to her 'poor though unbelieving nephew'. 'She might have done better, she might have done worse,' he observed. And by an odd coincidence her land lay not far from the Holroyd property; Lord Sheffield was eager to buy it. He could easily pay for it, he was sure, by cutting down some of the timber.

If then we accept Aunt Hester's view, Gibbon was a worldling, wallowing in the vanities of the flesh, scoffing at the holiness of the faith. But his other aunt, his mother's sister, took a very different view of him. To his Aunt Kitty he had been ever since he was a babe a source of acute anxiety—he was so weakly; and of intense pride—he was such a prodigy. His mother was one of those fly-away women who make great use of their unmarried sisters, since they are frequently in child-bed themselves and have an appetite for pleasure when they can escape the cares of the nursery. She died, moreover, in her prime; and Kitty of course took charge of the only survivor of all those cradles, nursed him, petted him, and was the first to inspire him with that love of pagan literature which was to bring the glitter of minarets and the flash of eastern pageantry so splendidly into his sometimes too pale and pompous prose. It was Aunt Kitty who, with a prodigality that would have scandalized Aunt Hester, flung open the door of that enchanted world—the world of *The Cavern of the Winds*, of the *Palace of Felicity*, of Pope's *Homer*, and of the *Arabian Nights* in which Edward was to roam for ever. 'Where a title attracted my eye, without fear or awe I snatched the volume from the shelf; and Mrs. Porten, who indulged herself in moral and religious speculations, was more prone to encourage than to check a curiosity above the strength of a boy.' And it was she who first loosened his lips. 'Her indulgent tenderness, the frankness of her temper, and my innate rising curiosity, soon removed all distance between us; like friends of an equal age, we freely

conversed on every topic, familiar or abstruse.' It was she who began the conversation which was still continuing in front of the fire in the library that summer night.

What would have happened if the child had fallen into the hands of his other aunt and her companion? Should we have had the *Decline and Fall* if they had controlled his reading and checked his curiosity, as William Law checked all reading and condemned all curiosity? It is an interesting question. But the effect on the man of his two incompatible aunts developed a conflict in his nature. Aunt Hester, from whom he expected a fortune, encouraged, it would seem from his letters, a streak of hypocrisy, a vein of smooth and calculating conventionality. He sneered to Sheffield at her religion; when she died he hailed her departure with a flippant joke. Aunt Kitty on the other hand brought out a strain of piety, of filial devotion. When she died he wrote, as if it were she and not the Saint who made him think kindly for a moment of Christianity, 'The immortality of the soul is on some occasions a very comfortable doctrine.' And it was she certainly who made him bethink him when she was asked to stay at Sheffield Place, that 'Aunt Kitty has a secret wish to lye in my room; if it is not occupied, it might be indulged.' So while Aunt Hester lay with William Law in the grave, Aunt Kitty hoisted herself into the great four-poster with the help of the stool which the little man always used, and lay there, seeing the very cupboards and chairs that her nephew saw when he slept there, and the pond perhaps and the trees out of the window. The great historian, whose gaze swept far horizons and surveyed the processions of the Roman Emperors, could also fix them minutely upon a rather tedious old lady and guess her fancy to sleep in a certain bed. He was a strange mixture.

Very strange, Maria may have thought as she sat there listening to his talk while she stitched: selfish yet tender; ridiculous yet sublime. Perhaps human nature was like that—by no means all of a piece; different at different moments; changing, as the furniture changed in the firelight, as the waters of the lake changed when the night wind swept over them. But it was time for bed; the party broke up. Mr. Gibbon, she noted with concern, for she was genuinely fond of him, had some difficulty in climbing the stairs. He was unwell; a slight operation for an old complaint

was necessary, and he left them with regret to go to town. The operation was over; the news was good; they hoped that he would soon be with them again. Then suddenly between five and six of a January evening an express arrived at Sheffield Place to say that he was dangerously ill. Lord Sheffield and his sister Serena started immediately for London. It was fine, luckily, and the moon was up. 'The night was light as day', Serena wrote to Maria. 'The beauty of it was solemn and almost melancholy with our train of ideas, but it seemed to calm our minds.' They reached Gibbon's lodging at midnight and 'poor Dussot came to the door the picture of despair to tell me *he* was no more. . . '. He had died that morning; he was already laid in the shell of his coffin. A few days later they brought him back to Sheffield Place; carried him through the Park, past the ponds, and laid him under a crimson cloth among the Holroyds in the Mausoleum.

As for the 'soft and stately Maria' she survived to the year 1863; and her granddaughter Kate, the mother of Bertrand Russell, marvelled that an old woman of that age should mind dying--an old woman who had lived through the French Revolution, who had entertained Gibbon at Sheffield Place.

Gothic Romance¹

IT says much for Miss Birkhead's² natural good sense that she has been able to keep her head where many people would have lost theirs. She has read a great many books without being suffocated. She has analysed a great many plots without being nauseated. Her sense of literature has not been extinguished by the waste-paper baskets full of old novels so courageously heaped on top of it. For her 'attempt to trace in outline the origin of the Gothic romance and the tale of terror' has necessarily led her to grope in basements and attics where the light is dim and the dust is thick. To trace the course of one strand in the thick skein of our literature is well worth doing. But perhaps Miss Birkhead would have increased the interest of her work if she had enlarged her scope to include some critical discussion of the aesthetic value of shock and terror, and had ventured some analysis of the taste which demands this particular stimulus. But her narrative is quite readable enough to supply the student with material for pushing the enquiry a little further.

Since it is held that Gothic romance was introduced by Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, in the year 1764, there is no need to confound it with the romance of Spenser or of Shakespeare. It is a parasite, an artificial commodity, produced half in joke in reaction against the current style, or in relief from it. If we run over the names of the most famous of the Gothic romancers—Clara Reeve, Mrs. Radcliffe, Monk Lewis, Charles Maturin, Sarah Wilkinson—we shall smile at the absurdity of the visions which they conjure up. We shall, perhaps, congratulate ourselves upon our improvement. Yet since our ancestors bought two thousand copies of Mrs. Bennett's *Beggar Girl and her Benefactors*, on the day of publication, at a cost of thirty-six shillings for the seven volumes, there must have been something in the trash that was appetizing, or something in the appetites that was coarse. It is only polite to give our ancestors the benefit of the doubt. Let us try to put ourselves in their places. The books that formed

¹ *Times Literary Supplement*, May 5, 1921

² *The Tale of Terror: A Study of the Gothic Romance*, by Edith Birkhead

part of the ordinary library in the year 1764 were, presumably, Johnson's *Vanity of Human Wishes*, Gray's *Poems*, Richardson's *Clarissa*, Addison's *Cato*, Pope's *Essay on Man*. No one could wish for a more distinguished company. At the same time, as literary critics are too little aware, a love of literature is often roused and for the first years nourished not by the good books, but by the bad. It will be an ill day when all the reading is done in libraries and none of it in tubes. In the eighteenth century there must have been a very large public which found no delight in the peculiar literary merits of the age; and if we reflect how long the days were and how empty of distraction, we need not be surprised to find a school of writers grown up in flat defiance of the prevailing masters. Horace Walpole, Clara Reeve, and Mrs. Radcliffe all turned their backs upon their time and plunged into the delightful obscurity of the Middle Ages, which were so much richer than the eighteenth century in castles, barons, moats, and murders.

What Horace Walpole began half in fun was continued seriously and with considerable power by Mrs. Radcliffe. That she had a conscience in the matter is evident from the pains she is at to explain her mysteries when they have done their work. The human body 'decayed and disfigured by worms, which were visible in the features and hands', turns out to be a waxen image credibly placed there in fulfilment of a vow. But there is little wonder that a novelist perpetually on the stretch first to invent mysteries and then to explain them had no leisure for the refinements of the art. 'Mrs. Radcliffe's heroines', says Miss Birkhead, 'resemble nothing more than a composite photograph in which all distinctive traits are merged into an expressionless type.' The same fault can be found with most books of sensation and adventure, and is, after all, inherent in the subject; for it is unlikely that a lady confronted by a male body stark naked, wreathed in worms, where she had looked, maybe, for a pleasant landscape in oils, should do more than give a loud cry and drop senseless. And women who give loud cries and drop senseless do it in much the same way. That is one of the reasons why it is extremely difficult to write a tale of terror which continues to shock and does not first become insipid and later ridiculous. Even Miss Wilkinson, who wrote that 'Adeline Barnett was fair as a lily, tall as the pine, her fine dark eyes sparkling as diamonds, and she

moved with the majestic air of a goddess', had to ridicule her own favourite style before she had done. Scott, Jane Austen, and Peacock stooped from their heights to laugh at the absurdity of the convention and drove it, at any rate, to take refuge underground. For it flourished subterraneously all through the nineteenth century, and for sixpence you can buy today at the book-stall the recognizable descendant of the *Mysteries of Udolpho*. Nor is Adeline Barnett by any means defunct. She is probably an earl's daughter at the present moment; vicious, painted; in society. But if you call her Miss Wilkinson's Adeline she will have to answer none the less.

It would be a fine exercise in discrimination to decide the precise point at which romance becomes Gothic and imagination moonshine. Coleridge's lines in *Kubla Khan* about the woman wailing for her demon lover are a perfect example of the successful use of emotion. The difficulty, as Miss Birkhead shows, is to know where to stop. Humour is comparatively easy to control; psychology is too toilsome to be frequently overdone; but a gift for romance easily escapes control and cruelly plunges its possessor into disrepute. Maturin and Monk Lewis heaped up horrors until Mrs. Radcliffe herself appeared calm and composed. And they have paid the penalty. The skull-headed lady, the vampire gentleman, the whole troop of monks and monsters who once froze and terrified now gibber in some dark cupboard of the servants' hall. In our day we flatter ourselves the effect is produced by subtler means. It is at the ghosts within us that we shudder, and not at the decaying bodies of barons or the subterranean activities of ghouls. Yet the desire to widen our boundaries, to feel excitement without danger, and to escape as far as possible from the facts of life drives us perpetually to trifle with the risky ingredients of the mysterious and the unknown. Science, as Miss Birkhead suggests, will modify the Gothic romance of the future with the aeroplane and the telephone. Already the bolder of our novelists have made use of psycho-analysis to startle and dismay. And already such perils attend the use of the abnormal in fiction—the younger generation has been heard to complain that the horror of the *Turn of the Screw* is altogether too tame and conventional to lift a hair of their heads. But can we possibly say that Henry James was a Goth?

Sir Walter Scott

*I. Gas At Abbotsford*¹

EITHER Scott the novelist is swallowed whole and becomes part of the body and brain, or he is rejected entirely. There is no middle party in existence—no busybodies run from camp to camp with offers of mediation. For there is no war. The novels of Dickens, Trollope, Henry James, Tolstoy, the Brontës— they are discussed perpetually; the Waverley Novels never. There they remain, completely accepted, entirely rejected—a queer stage in that ever-changing process which is called immortality. If anything is going to break the deadlock perhaps it is the first volume of Scott's Journal, 1825-1826, which Mr. J. G. Tait has been at immense pains to edit and revise. As Scott's Journals are the best life of Scott in existence, as they contain Scott in his glory and Scott in his gloom, and gossip about Byron, and the famous comment upon Jane Austen, as in a few passages Scott throws more light upon his genius and its limitations than all his critics in their innumerable volumes, this new version may one of these dark nights bring the two non-combatants to blows.

By way of inducing that desirable encounter, let us take the entry for November 21st, 1825: 'Went to the Oil Gas Committee this morning, of which concern I am President or Chairman.' Scott, as Lockhart tells us and we can well believe, had a passion for gas. He loved a bright light, and he did not mind a slight smell. As for the expense of those innumerable pipes, in dining-room, drawing-room, corridors, and bedrooms, and the men's wages— he swept all that aside in those glorious days when his imagination was at its height. 'The state of an illumination was constantly kept up'; and the gas shone upon a brilliant company. Everyone was flocking to Abbotsford—dukes and duchesses, lion-hunters and toadies, the famous and the obscure. 'Oh dear,' Miss Scott exclaimed. 'Will this never end, Papa?' And her father replied, 'Let them come, the more the merrier.' And someone else walked in.

One night, a year or two before the diary begins, the stranger was a young artist. Artists were so common at Abbotsford that Scott's dog, Maida, recognized them at sight and got up and left the room. This time it was William Bewick, obscure, penniless, in pursuit of sitters. Naturally he was a good deal dazzled both by the gas and the company. Kind Mrs. Hughes, therefore, the wife of the deaf Dean of St. Paul's, tried to put him at his ease. She told him how she had often soothed her children's quarrels by showing them Bewick's woodcuts. But William Bewick was no relation of Thomas Bewick. One feels that he had heard the remark before and rather resented it, for was he not a painter himself?

He was a painter himself, and an extremely bad one. Did not Haydon say 'Bewick, my pupil, has realized my hopes in his picture of Jacob and Rachel'? Did he not add, some years later, when they had quarrelled about money, 'Daniel's left foot and leg would have disgraced Bewick before he ran away from my tuition to the shelter of Academical wings'? But we know without Haydon's testimony that Bewick's portraits were intolerable. We know that from his writing. His friends are always painted in a state of violent physical agitation, but mentally they are stock still, stone dead. There is his picture of Hazlitt playing tennis. 'He looked more like a savage animal than anything human. . . .' He cast off his shirt; he leapt; he darted; when the game was over he rubbed himself against a post, dripping with sweat. But when he spoke, 'His ejaculations were interlarded', Bewick says, 'with unintentional and unmeaning oaths.' They cannot be repeated; they must be imagined; in other words, Hazlitt was dumb. Or take Bewick's account of an evening party in a small room when the Italian poet Foscolo met Wordsworth. They argued. Foscolo 'deliberately doubled his fist and held it in Wordsworth's face close to his nose'. Then, suddenly, he began whirling round the room, tossing his quizzing glass, rolling his R's, bawling. The ladies 'drew in their feet and costumes'. Wordsworth sat 'opening his mouth and eyes, gasping for breath'. At last he spoke. For page after page he spoke; or rather dead phrases coagulated upon his lips, in frozen and lifeless entanglements. Listen for a moment. 'Although I appreciate, and I hope, can admire sufficiently the beauties of Raphael's transcendent

genius . . . yet we must brace the sinews, so to speak, of our comprehension to grapple with the grandeur and sublimity . . . of Michael Angelo. . . .’ It is enough. We see Bewick’s pictures; we realize how intolerable it became to sit any longer under the portrait of Grandpapa flinging out a bare arm from the toga while the horse in the background champs his bit, paws the ground, and seems to neigh.

That night at Abbotsford the gas blazed from the three great chandeliers over the dinner-table; and the dinner, ‘as my friend, Thackeray, would have said, was *recherché*’. Then they went into the drawing-room—a vast apartment with its mirrors, its marble tables, Chantrey’s bust, the varnished woodwork and the crimson tasselled curtains pendant from handsome brass rods. They went in and Bewick was dazzled—‘The brilliant gaslight, the elegance and taste displayed throughout this beautiful apartment, the costumes of the ladies, with the sparkle and glitter of the tea-table’—the scene, as Bewick describes it, brings back all the worst passages in the Waverley Novels. We can see the jewels sparkling, we can smell the gas escaping, we can hear the conversation. There is Lady Scott gossiping with kind Mrs. Hughes; there is Scott himself, prosing and pompous, grumbling about his son Charles and his passion for sport. ‘But I suppose it will have an end at a given time, like any other hobby of youth.’ To complete the horror, the German Baron D’este strums on the guitar. He is showing ‘how in Germany they introduced into guitar performances of martial music the imitation of the beating of drums’. Miss Scott—or is she Miss Wardour or another of the vapid and vacant Waverley Novel heroines?—hangs over him entranced. Then, suddenly, the whole scene changes. Scott began in a low mournful voice to recite the ballad of Sir Patrick Spens:

*Oh lang lang may their ladies sit
With their fans in their hands
Or e’er they see Sir Patrick Spens
Come sailing to the land.*

The guitar stopped; Sir Walter’s lips trembled as he came to an end. So it happens, too, in the novels—the lifeless English turns to living Scots.

Bewick came again. Again he joined that extraordinary company, all distinguished either for their genius or for their rank. Again the tiny red beads of light in the chandeliers blossomed at the turn of a screw into 'a gush of splendour worthy of the palace of Aladdin'. And there they all were, those gas-lit celebrities, dashed in with the usual dabs of bright oily paint: Lord Minto in plain black, wearing a most primitive tie; Lord Minto's chaplain, with his saturnine expression and his hair combed and cut as if by the edge of a barber's basin; Lord Minto's servant, so enthralled by Scott's stories that he forgot to change the plates; Sir John Malcolm wearing his star and ribbon; and little Johnny Lockhart gazing at the star. 'You must try and get hold of one,' said Sir Walter, upon which Lockhart smiled, '... the only time I have observed him to relieve his fixed features from that impenetrable reserve, etc., etc.' And again they went into that beautiful apartment, and Sir John announced that he was about to tell his famous Persian story. Everybody must be summoned. Summoned they were.

From all quarters of that teeming and hospitable house guests came flocking. 'One young lady, I remember, was brought from her sick-bed wrapt in blankets and laid on the sofa.' The story began; the story went on. So long was it that it had to be cut into 'miles'. At the end of one Sir John stopped and asked 'Shall I go on?' 'Do go on, do go on, Sir John,' Lady Scott entreated, and on he went, mile after mile, until—from where?—there appeared Monsieur Alexandre, the French ventriloquist, who at once began to imitate the planing of a French-polished dinner-table. 'The attitude, the action, the noise, the screeches and hitches at knots, throwing off the shavings with his left hand, were all so perfect that Lady Scott, in alarm, screamed "Oh! my dining-room table, you are spoiling my dining-room table! It will never be got bright again!"' And Sir Walter had to reassure her. 'It is only imitation, my dear . . . it is only make-believe . . . he will not hurt the table.' And the screeching began again, and Lady Scott screamed again, and on it went, the screeching and the screaming, until the sweat poured from the ventriloquist's forehead, and it was time for bed.

Scott took Bewick to his room; on the way he stopped; he spoke. His words were simple—oddly simple, and yet after all

that gas and glitter they seem to come from the living lips of an ordinary human being. The muscles are relaxed; the toga slips off him. 'You, I suppose, would be of the stock of Sir Robert Bewick?' That was all, but it was enough—enough to make Bewick feel that the great man, for all his greatness, had noted his discomfiture when Mrs. Hughes was so tactful, and wished to give him his chance. He took it. 'I,' he exclaimed, 'am of a very ancient family, the Bewicks of Annan, who lost their estates . . .' Out it all came; on it all went. Then Scott opened the bedroom door, and showed him the gas—how you can turn it up, how you can turn it down. And, expressing the hope that his guest would be comfortable—if not, he was to ring the bell—Scott left him. But Bewick could not sleep. He tossed and tumbled. He thought, as the people in his pictures must have thought, about magicians' cells, alchemists' spells, lions' lairs, the pallet of poverty, and the downy couch of luxury. Then, remembering the great man and his goodness, he burst into tears, prayed, and fell asleep.

We, however, can follow Scott to his room. By the light of his journals, the natural and fitful light of happiness and sorrow, we can see him after the party was over, when poor Charlotte chattered no more, and Maida had gone where, let us hope, artists no longer paint the favourite dogs of celebrated men. But after a party is over, some saying, some figure often remains in the mind. Now it is the ventriloquist, Monsieur Alexandre. Was Scott himself, we ask, glancing at the long line of the Waverley Novels, merely the greatest of all the ventriloquist novelists, of all who imitate human speech without hurting the dining-room table—it is all make-believe, my dear, it is all imitation? Or was he the last of the playwright novelists, who, when the pressure of emotion is strong enough behind them can leap the bounds of prose and make real thoughts and real emotions issue in real words from living lips? So many playwrights did; but of novelists who—except Sir Walter and, perhaps, Dickens? To write as they did, to keep so hospitable and teeming a house, where earls and artists, ventriloquists and barons, dogs and young ladies speak each in character, must not one be as they were, half-ventriloquist, half-poet? And is it not the combination in the Waverley Novels of gas and daylight, ventriloquy and truth, that separates

the two parties, and might they not, using the journals as stepping-stones, with a glance at these crude illustrations from the brush of William Bewick, break the deadlock and come to blows?

II. *The Antiquary*¹

There are some writers who have entirely ceased to influence others, whose fame is for that reason both serene and cloudless, who are enjoyed or neglected rather than criticized and read. Among them is Scott. The most impressionable beginner, whose pen oscillates if exposed within a mile of the influence of Stendhal, Flaubert, Henry James, or Chekhov, can read the Waverley Novels one after another without altering an adjective. Yet there are no books perhaps upon which at this moment more thousands of readers are brooding and feasting in a rapture of uncritical and silent satisfaction. And if this is the mood in which the Waverley Novels are read, the inference is perhaps that there is something vicious about such a pleasure; it cannot be defended; it must be enjoyed in secret. Let us run through *The Antiquary* again and make a note or two as we go. The first charge that is levelled against Scott is that his style is execrable. Every page of the novel, it is true, is watered down with long languid Latin words—peruse, manifest, evince. Old metaphors out of the property box come flapping their dusty wings across the sky. The sea in the heat of a crisis is ‘the devouring element’. A gull on the same occasion is a ‘winged denizen of the crag’. Taken from their context it is impossible to deny that such expressions sound wrong, though a good case might be made against the snobbery which insists upon preserving class distinctions even among words. But read currently in their places, it is difficult either to notice or to condemn them. As Scott uses them they fulfil their purpose and merge perfectly in their surroundings. Great novelists who are going to fill seventy volumes write after all in pages, not in sentences, and have at their command, and know when to use, a dozen different styles of varying intensities. The genteel pen is a very useful pen in its place. These slips and slovenlinesses serve as relaxations; they give the reader breathing space and air the

¹ Written in 1924

book. Let us compare Scott the slovenly with Stevenson the precise. 'It was as he said: there was not a breath stirring; a windless stricture of frost had bound the air; and as we went forth in the shine of the candles, the blackness was like a roof over our heads.' One may search the Waverley Novels in vain for such close writing as this. But if we get from Stevenson a much closer idea of a single object, we get from Scott an incomparably larger impression of the whole. The storm in *The Antiquary*, made up as it is of stage hangings and cardboard screens, of 'denizens of the crags' and 'clouds like disasters round a sinking empire', nevertheless roars and splashes and almost devours the group huddled on the crag; while the storm in *Kidnapped*, for all its exact detail and its neat dapper adjectives, is incapable of wetting the sole of a lady's slipper.

The much more serious charge against Scott is that he used the wrong pen, the genteel pen, not merely to fill in the background and dash off a cloud piece, but to describe the intricacies and passions of the human heart. But what language to use of the Lovels and Isabellas, the Darsies, Ediths, and Mortons! As well talk of the hearts of seagulls and the passions and intricacies of walking-sticks and umbrellas; for indeed these ladies and gentlemen are scarcely to be distinguished from the winged denizens of the crag. They are equally futile; equally impotent; they squeak; they flutter; and a strong smell of camphor exudes from their poor dried breasts when, with a dismal croaking and cawing, they emit the astonishing language of their love-making.

'Without my father's consent, I will never entertain the addresses of anyone; and how totally impossible it is that he should countenance the partiality with which you honour me, you are yourself fully aware,' says the young lady. 'Do not add to the severity of repelling my sentiments the rigour of obliging me to disavow them,' replies the young gentleman; and he may be illegitimate, and he may be the son of a peer, or he may be both one and the other, but it would take a far stronger inducement than that to make us care a straw what happens to Lovel and his Isabella.

But then, perhaps, we are not meant to care a straw. When Scott has pacified his conscience as a magistrate by alluding to the sentiments of the upper classes in tones of respect and esteem,

when he has vindicated his character as a moralist by awakening 'the better feelings and sympathies of his readers by strains of generous sentiment and tales of fictitious woe', he was quit both of art and of morals, and could scribble endlessly for his own amusement. Never was a change more emphatic; never one more wholly to the good. One is tempted, indeed, to suppose that he did it, half-consciously, on purpose—he showed up the languor of the fine gentlemen who bored him by the immense vivacity of the common people whom he loved. Images, anecdotes, illustrations drawn from sea, sky, and earth, race and bubble from their lips. They shoot every thought as it flies, and bring it tumbling to the ground in metaphor. Sometimes it is a phrase—'at the back of a dyke, in a wreath o' snaw, or in the wame o' a wave'; sometimes a proverb—'he'll no can haud down his head to sneeze, for fear o' seeing his shoon'; always the dialogue is sharpened and pointed by the use of that Scottish dialect which is at once so homely and so pungent, so colloquial and so passionate, so shrewd and so melancholy into the bargain. And the result is strange. For since the sovereigns who should preside have abdicated, since we are afloat on a broad and breezy sea without a pilot, the Waverley Novels are as unmoral as Shakespeare's plays. Nor, for some readers, is it the least part of their astonishing freshness, their perennial vitality, that you may read them over and over again, and never know for certain what Scott himself was or what Scott himself thought.

We know, however, what his characters are, and we know it almost as we know what our friends are by hearing their voices and watching their faces simultaneously. However often one may have read *The Antiquary*, Jonathan Oldbuck is slightly different every time. We notice different things; our observation of face and voice differs; and thus Scott's characters, like Shakespeare's and Jane Austen's, have the seed of life in them. They change as we change. But though this gift is an essential element in what we call immortality, it does not by any means prove that the character lives as profoundly, as fully, as Falstaff lives or Hamlet. Scott's characters, indeed, suffer from a serious disability; it is only when they speak that they are alive; they never think; as for prying into their minds himself, or drawing inferences from their behaviour, Scott never attempted it. 'Miss Wardour, as if

she felt that she had said too much, turned and got into the carriage'—he will penetrate no further into the privacy of Miss Wardour than that; and it is not far. But this matters the less because the characters he cared for were by temperament chatterboxes; Edie Ochiltree, Oldbuck, Mrs. Mucklebackit talk incessantly. They reveal their characters in talk. If they stop talking it is to act. By their talk and by their acts—that is how we know them.

But how far then can we know people, the hostile critic may ask, if we only know that they say this and do that, if they never talk about themselves, and if their creator lets them go their ways, provided they forward his plot, in complete independence of his supervision or interference? Are they not all of them, Ochiltrees, Antiquaries, Dandy Dinmonts, and the rest, merely bundles of humours, and innocent childish humours at that, who serve to beguile our dull hours and charm our sick ones, and are packed off to the nursery when the working day returns and our normal faculties crave something tough to set their teeth into? Compare the *Waverley Novels* with the novels of Tolstoy, of Stendhal, of Proust! These comparisons of course lead to questions that lie at the root of fiction, but without discussing them, they reveal unmistakably what Scott is not. He is not among the great observers of the intricacies of the heart. He is not going to break seals or loose fountains. But he has the power of the artist who can create a scene and leave us to analyse it for ourselves. When we read the scene in the cottage where Steenie Mucklebackit lies dead, the different emotions—the father's grief, the mother's irritability, the minister's consolations—all rise spontaneously, as if Scott had merely to record, and we have merely to observe. What we lose in intricacy we gain perhaps in spontaneity and the stimulus given to our own creative powers. It is true that Scott creates carelessly, as if the parts came together without his willing it; it is true also that his scene breaks into ruin without his caring.

For who taps at the door and destroys that memorable scene? The cadaverous Earl of Glenallan; the unhappy nobleman who had married his sister in the belief that she was his cousin; and had stalked the world in sables ever after. Falsity breaks in; the peerage breaks in; all the trappings of the undertaker and heralds'

office press upon us their unwholesome claims. The emotions then in which Scott excels are not those of human beings pitted against other human beings, but of man pitted against Nature, of man in relation to fate. His romance is the romance of hunted men hiding in woods at night; of brigs standing out to sea; of waves breaking in the moonlight; of solitary sands and distant horsemen; of violence and suspense. And he is perhaps the last novelist to practise the great, the Shakespearean art, of making people reveal themselves in speech.

Jane Austen

IT is probable that if Miss Cassandra Austen had had her way we should have had nothing of Jane Austen's except her novels. To her elder sister alone did she write freely; to her alone she confided her hopes and, if rumour is true, the one great disappointment of her life; but when Miss Cassandra Austen grew old, and the growth of her sister's fame made her suspect that a time might come when strangers would pry and scholars speculate, she burnt, at great cost to herself, every letter that could gratify their curiosity, and spared only what she judged too trivial to be of interest.

Hence our knowledge of Jane Austen is derived from a little gossip, a few letters, and her books. As for the gossip, gossip which has survived its day is never despicable; with a little rearrangement it suits our purpose admirably. For example, Jane 'is not at all pretty and very prim, unlike a girl of twelve . . . Jane is whimsical and affected,' says little Philadelphia Austen of her cousin. Then we have Mrs. Mitford, who knew the Austens as girls and thought Jane 'the prettiest, silliest, most affected husband-hunting butterfly she ever remembers'. Next, there is Miss Mitford's anonymous friend 'who visits her now [and] says that she has stiffened into the most perpendicular, precise, taciturn piece of "single blessedness" that ever existed, and that, until *Pride and Prejudice* showed what a precious gem was hidden in that unbending case, she was no more regarded in society than a poker or firescreen. . . . The case is very different now', the good lady goes on; 'she is still a poker—but a poker of whom everybody is afraid. . . . A wit, a delineator of character, who does not talk is terrific indeed!' On the other side, of course, there are the Austens, a race little given to panegyric of themselves, but nevertheless, they say, her brothers 'were very fond and very proud of her. They were attached to her by her talents, her virtues, and her engaging manners, and each loved afterwards to fancy a resemblance in some niece or daughter of his own to the dear sister Jane, whose perfect equal they yet never expected to see.' Charming but perpendicular, loved at home but feared

by strangers, biting of tongue but tender of heart—these contrasts are by no means incompatible, and when we turn to the novels we shall find ourselves stumbling there too over the same complexities in the writer.

To begin with, that prim little girl whom Philadelphia found so unlike a child of twelve, whimsical and affected, was soon to be the authoress of an astonishing and unchildish story, *Love and Freindship*,¹ which, incredible though it appears, was written at the age of fifteen. It was written, apparently, to amuse the schoolroom; one of the stories in the same book is dedicated with mock solemnity to her brother; another is neatly illustrated with water-colour heads by her sister. These are jokes which, one feels, were family property; thrusts of satire, which went home because all little Austens made mock in common of fine ladies who 'sighed and fainted on the sofa'.

Brothers and sisters must have laughed when Jane read out loud her last hit at the vices which they all abhorred. 'I die a martyr to my grief for the loss of Augustus. One fatal swoon has cost me my life. Beware of Swoons, Dear Laura. . . . Run mad as often as you chuse, but do not faint. . . .' And on she rushed, as fast as she could write and quicker than she could spell, to tell the incredible adventures of Laura and Sophia, of Philander and Gustavus, of the gentleman who drove a coach between Edinburgh and Stirling every other day, of the theft of the fortune that was kept in the table drawer, of the starving mothers and the sons who acted Macbeth. Undoubtedly, the story must have roused the schoolroom to uproarious laughter. And yet, nothing is more obvious than that this girl of fifteen, sitting in her private corner of the common parlour, was writing not to draw a laugh from brother and sisters, and not for home consumption. She was writing for everybody, for nobody, for our age, for her own; in other words, even at that early age Jane Austen was writing. One hears it in the rhythm and shapeliness and severity of the sentences. 'She was nothing more than a mere good-tempered, civil, and obliging young woman; as such we could scarcely dislike her—she was only an object of contempt.' Such a sentence is meant to outlast the Christmas holidays. Spirited, easy, full of fun, verging with freedom upon sheer nonsense,—*Love and*

¹ *Love and Freindship*, Chatto and Windus

Freindship is all that; but what is this note which never merges in the rest, which sounds distinctly and penetratingly all through the volume? It is the sound of laughter. The girl of fifteen is laughing, in her corner, at the world.

Girls of fifteen are always laughing. They laugh when Mr. Binney helps himself to salt instead of sugar. They almost die of laughing when old Mrs. Tomkins sits down upon the cat. But they are crying the moment after. They have no fixed abode from which they see that there is something eternally laughable in human nature, some quality in men and women that for ever excites our satire. They do not know that Lady Greville who snubs, and poor Maria who is snubbed, are permanent features of every ballroom. But Jane Austen knew it from her birth upwards. One of those fairies who perch upon cradles must have taken her a flight through the world directly she was born. When she was laid in the cradle again she knew not only what the world looked like, but had already chosen her kingdom. She had agreed that if she might rule over that territory, she would covet no other. Thus at fifteen she had few illusions about other people and none about herself. Whatever she writes is finished and turned and set in its relation, not to the parsonage, but to the universe. She is impersonal; she is inscrutable. When the writer, Jane Austen, wrote down in the most remarkable sketch in the book a little of Lady Greville's conversation, there is no trace of anger at the snub which the clergyman's daughter, Jane Austen, once received. Her gaze passes straight to the mark, and we know precisely where, upon the map of human nature, that mark is. We know because Jane Austen kept to her compact; she never trespassed beyond her boundaries. Never, even at the emotional age of fifteen, did she round upon herself in shame, obliterate a sarcasm in a spasm of compassion, or blur an outline in a mist of rhapsody. Spasms and rhapsodies, she seems to have said, pointing with her stick, end *there*; and the boundary line is perfectly distinct. But she does not deny that moons and mountains and castles exist—on the other side. She has even one romance of her own. It is for the Queen of Scots. She really admired her very much. 'One of the first characters in the world', she called her, 'a bewitching Princess whose only friend was then the Duke of Norfolk, and whose only ones now Mr. Whitaker, Mrs. Lefroy,

Mrs. Knight and myself.' With these words her passion is neatly circumscribed, and rounded with a laugh. It is amusing to remember in what terms the young Brontës wrote, not very much later, in their northern parsonage, about the Duke of Wellington.

The prim little girl grew up. She became 'the prettiest, silliest, most affected husband-hunting butterfly' Mrs. Mitford ever remembered, and, incidentally, the authoress of a novel called *Pride and Prejudice*, which, written stealthily under cover of a creaking door, lay for many years unpublished. A little later, it is thought, she began another story, *The Watsons*, and being for some reason dissatisfied with it, left it unfinished. The second-rate works of a great writer are worth reading because they offer the best criticism of his masterpieces. Here her difficulties are more apparent, and the method she took to overcome them less artfully concealed. To begin with, the stiffness and the bareness of the first chapters prove that she was one of those writers who lay their facts out rather baldly in the first version and then go back and back and back and cover them with flesh and atmosphere. How it would have been done we cannot say—by what suppressions and insertions and artful devices. But the miracle would have been accomplished; the dull history of fourteen years of family life would have been converted into another of those exquisite and apparently effortless introductions; and we should never have guessed what pages of preliminary drudgery Jane Austen forced her pen to go through. Here we perceive that she was no conjurer after all. Like other writers, she had to create the atmosphere in which her own peculiar genius could bear fruit. Here she fumbles; here she keeps us waiting. Suddenly she has done it; now things can happen as she likes things to happen. The Edwardses are going to the ball. The Tomlinsons' carriage is passing; she can tell us that Charles is 'being provided with his gloves and told to keep them on'; Tom Musgrave retreats to a remote corner with a barrel of oysters and is famously snug. Her genius is freed and active. At once our senses quicken; we are possessed with the peculiar intensity which she alone can impart. But of what is it all composed? Of a ball in a country town; a few couples meeting and taking hands in an assembly room; a little eating and drinking; and for catastrophe, a boy being snubbed by one young lady and kindly treated by another. There is no tragedy and no

heroism. Yet for some reason the little scene is moving out of all proportion to its surface solemnity. We have been made to see that if Emma acted so in the ballroom, how considerate, how tender, inspired by what sincerity of feeling she would have shown herself in those graver crises of life which, as we watch her, come inevitably before our eyes. Jane Austen is thus a mistress of much deeper emotion than appears upon the surface. She stimulates us to supply what is not there. What she offers is, apparently, a trifle, yet is composed of something that expands in the reader's mind and endows with the most enduring form of life scenes which are outwardly trivial. Always the stress is laid upon character. How, we are made to wonder, will Emma behave when Lord Osborne and Tom Musgrave make their call at five minutes before three, just as Mary is bringing in the tray and the knife-case? It is an extremely awkward situation. The young men are accustomed to much greater refinement. Emma may prove herself ill-bred, vulgar, a nonentity. The turns and twists of the dialogue keep us on the tenterhooks of suspense. Our attention is half upon the present moment, half upon the future. And when, in the end, Emma behaves in such a way as to vindicate our highest hopes of her, we are moved as if we had been made witnesses of a matter of the highest importance. Here, indeed, in this unfinished and in the main inferior story, are all the elements of Jane Austen's greatness. It has the permanent quality of literature. Think away the surface animation, the likeness to life, and there remains, to provide a deeper pleasure, an exquisite discrimination of human values. Dismiss this too from the mind and one can dwell with extreme satisfaction upon the more abstract art which, in the ballroom scene, so varies the emotions and proportions the parts that it is possible to enjoy it, as one enjoys poetry, for itself, and not as a link which carries the story this way and that.

But the gossip says of Jane Austen that she was perpendicular, precise, and taciturn—'a poker of whom everybody is afraid'. Of this too there are traces; she could be merciless enough; she is one of the most consistent satirists in the whole of literature. Those first angular chapters of *The Watsons* prove that hers was not a prolific genius; she had not, like Emily Brontë, merely to open the door to make herself felt. Humbly and gaily she collected

the twigs and straws out of which the nest was to be made and placed them neatly together. The twigs and straws were a little dry and a little dusty in themselves. There was the big house and the little house; a tea party, a dinner party, and an occasional picnic; life was hedged in by valuable connections and adequate incomes; by muddy roads, wet feet, and a tendency on the part of the ladies to get tired; a little principle supported it, a little consequence, and the education commonly enjoyed by upper middle-class families living in the country. Vice, adventure, passion were left outside. But of all this prosiness, of all this littleness, she evades nothing, and nothing is slurred over. Patiently and precisely she tells us how they 'made no stop anywhere till they reached Newbury, where a comfortable meal, uniting dinner and supper, wound up the enjoyments and fatigues of the day'. Nor does she pay to conventions merely the tribute of lip homage; she believes in them besides accepting them. When she is describing a clergyman, like Edmund Bertram, or a sailor, in particular, she appears debarred by the sanctity of his office from the free use of her chief tool, the comic genius, and is apt therefore to lapse into decorous panegyric or matter-of-fact description. But these are exceptions; for the most part her attitude recalls the anonymous lady's ejaculation—'A wit, a delineator of character, who does not talk is terrific indeed!' She wishes neither to reform nor to annihilate; she is silent; and that is terrific indeed. One after another she creates her fools, her prigs, her worldlings, her Mr. Collinses, her Sir Walter Elliotts, her Mrs. Bennets. She encircles them with the lash of a whip-like phrase which, as it runs round them, cuts out their silhouettes for ever. But there they remain; no excuse is found for them and no mercy shown them. Nothing remains of Julia and Maria Bertram when she has done with them; Lady Bertram is left 'sitting and calling to Pug and trying to keep him from the flower-beds' eternally. A divine justice is meted out; Dr. Grant, who begins by liking his goose tender, ends by bringing on 'apoplexy and death, by three great institutional dinners in one week'. Sometimes it seems as if her creatures were born merely to give Jane Austen the supreme delight of slicing their heads off. She is satisfied; she is content; she would not alter a hair on anybody's head, or move one brick or one blade of grass in a world which provides her with such exquisite delight.

Nor, indeed, would we. For even if the pangs of outraged vanity, or the heat of moral wrath, urged us to improve away a world so full of spite, pettiness, and folly, the task is beyond our powers. People are like that—the girl of fifteen knew it; the mature woman proves it. At this very moment some Lady Bertram is trying to keep Pug from the flower-beds; she sends Chapman to help Miss Fanny a little late. The discrimination is so perfect, the satire so just, that, consistent though it is, it almost escapes our notice. No touch of pettiness, no hint of spite, rouse us from our contemplation. Delight strangely mingles with our amusement. Beauty illumines these fools.

That elusive quality is, indeed, often made up of very different parts, which it needs a peculiar genius to bring together. The wit of Jane Austen has for partner the perfection of her taste. Her fool is a fool, her snob is a snob, because he departs from the model of sanity and sense which she has in mind, and conveys to us unmistakably even while she makes us laugh. Never did any novelist make more use of an impeccable sense of human values. It is against the disc of an unerring heart, an unfailing good taste, an almost stern morality, that she shows up those deviations from kindness, truth, and sincerity which are among the most delightful things in English literature. She depicts a Mary Crawford in her mixture of good and bad entirely by this means. She lets her rattle on against the clergy, or in favour of a baronetage and ten thousand a year, with all the ease and spirit possible; but now and again she strikes one note of her own, very quietly, but in perfect tune, and at once all Mary Crawford's chatter, though it continues to amuse, rings flat. Hence the depth, the beauty, the complexity of her scenes. From such contrasts there comes a beauty, a solemnity even, which are not only as remarkable as her wit, but an inseparable part of it. In *The Watsons* she gives us a foretaste of this power; she makes us wonder why an ordinary act of kindness, as she describes it, becomes so full of meaning. In her masterpieces, the same gift is brought to perfection. Here is nothing out of the way; it is midday in Northamptonshire; a dull young man is talking to rather a weakly young woman on the stairs as they go up to dress for dinner, with housemaids passing. But, from triviality, from commonplace, their words become suddenly full of meaning, and the moment for both one

of the most memorable in their lives. It fills itself; it shines; it glows; it hangs before us, deep, trembling, serene for a second; next, the housemaid passes, and this drop, in which all the happiness of life has collected, gently subsides again to become part of the ebb and flow of ordinary existence.

What more natural, then, with this insight into their profundity, than that Jane Austen should have chosen to write of the trivialities of day-to-day existence, of parties, picnics, and country dances? No 'suggestions to alter her style of writing' from the Prince Regent or Mr. Clarke could tempt her; no romance, no adventure, no politics or intrigue could hold a candle to life on a country-house staircase as she saw it. Indeed, the Prince Regent and his Librarian had run their heads against a very formidable obstacle; they were trying to tamper with an incorruptible conscience, to disturb an infallible discretion. The child who formed her sentences so finely when she was fifteen never ceased to form them, and never wrote for the Prince Regent or his Librarian, but for the world at large. She knew exactly what her powers were, and what material they were fitted to deal with as material should be dealt with by a writer whose standard of finality was high. There were impressions that lay outside her province; emotions that by no stretch or artifice could be properly coated and covered by her own resources. For example, she could not make a girl talk enthusiastically of banners and chapels. She could not throw herself whole-heartedly into a romantic moment. She had all sorts of devices for evading scenes of passion. Nature and its beauties she approached in a sidelong way of her own. She describes a beautiful night without once mentioning the moon. Nevertheless, as we read the few formal phrases about 'the brilliancy of an unclouded night and the contrast of the deep shade of the woods', the night is at once as 'solemn, and soothing, and lovely' as she tells us, quite simply, that it was.

The balance of her gifts was singularly perfect. Among her finished novels there are no failures, and among her many chapters few that sink markedly below the level of the others. But, after all, she died at the age of forty-two. She died at the height of her powers. She was still subject to those changes which often make the final period of a writer's career the most interesting of all. Vivacious, irrepressible, gifted with an invention of great

vitality, there can be no doubt that she would have written more, had she lived, and it is tempting to consider whether she would not have written differently. The boundaries were marked; moons, mountains, and castles lay on the other side. But was she not sometimes tempted to trespass for a minute? Was she not beginning, in her own gay and brilliant manner, to contemplate a little voyage of discovery?

Let us take *Persuasion*, the last completed novel, and look by its light at the books she might have written had she lived. There is a peculiar beauty and a peculiar dullness in *Persuasion*. The dullness is that which so often marks the transition stage between two different periods. The writer is a little bored. She has grown too familiar with the ways of her world; she no longer notes them freshly. There is an asperity in her comedy which suggests that she has almost ceased to be amused by the vanities of a Sir Walter or the snobbery of a Miss Elliott. The satire is harsh, and the comedy crude. She is no longer so freshly aware of the amusements of daily life. Her mind is not altogether on her object. But, while we feel that Jane Austen has done this before, and done it better, we also feel that she is trying to do something which she has never yet attempted. There is a new element in *Persuasion*, the quality, perhaps, that made Dr. Whewell fire up and insist that it was 'the most beautiful of her works'. She is beginning to discover that the world is larger, more mysterious, and more romantic than she had supposed. We feel it to be true of herself when she says of Anne: 'She had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older—the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning'. She dwells frequently upon the beauty and the melancholy of nature, upon the autumn where she had been wont to dwell upon the spring. She talks of the 'influence so sweet and so sad of autumnal months in the country'. She marks 'the tawny leaves and withered hedges'. 'One does not love a place the less because one has suffered in it', she observes. But it is not only in a new sensibility to nature that we detect the change. Her attitude to life itself is altered. She is seeing it, for the greater part of the book, through the eyes of a woman who, unhappy herself, has a special sympathy for the happiness and unhappiness of others, which, until the very end, she is forced to comment upon in silence. Therefore the observation is less of

facts and more of feelings than is usual. There is an expressed emotion in the scene at the concert and in the famous talk about woman's constancy which proves not merely the biographical fact that Jane Austen had loved, but the aesthetic fact that she was no longer afraid to say so. Experience, when it was of a serious kind, had to sink very deep, and to be thoroughly disinfected by the passage of time, before she allowed herself to deal with it in fiction. But now, in 1817, she was ready. Outwardly, too, in her circumstances, a change was imminent. Her fame had grown very slowly. 'I doubt', wrote Mr. Austen Leigh, 'whether it would be possible to mention any other author of note whose personal obscurity was so complete.' Had she lived a few more years only, all that would have been altered. She would have stayed in London, dined out, lunched out, met famous people, made new friends, read, travelled, and carried back to the quiet country cottage a hoard of observations to feast upon at leisure.

And what effect would all this have had upon the six novels that Jane Austen did not write? She would not have written of crime, of passion, or of adventure. She would not have been rushed by the importunity of publishers or the flattery of friends into slovenliness or insincerity. But she would have known more. Her sense of security would have been shaken. Her comedy would have suffered. She would have trusted less (this is already perceptible in *Persuasion*) to dialogue and more to reflection to give us a knowledge of her characters. Those marvellous little speeches which sum up, in a few minutes' chatter, all that we need in order to know an Admiral Croft or a Mrs. Musgrove for ever, that shorthand, hit-or-miss method which contains chapters of analysis and psychology, would have become too crude to hold all that she now perceived of the complexity of human nature. She would have devised a method, clear and composed as ever, but deeper and more suggestive, for conveying not only what people say, but what they leave unsaid; not only what they are, but what life is. She would have stood farther away from her characters, and seen them more as a group, less as individuals. Her satire, while it played less incessantly, would have been more stringent and severe. She would have been the forerunner of Henry James and of Proust—but enough. Vain are these speculations: the most

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perfect artist among women, the writer whose books are immortal, died 'just as she was beginning to feel confidence in her own success'.

William Hazlitt

HAD one met Hazlitt no doubt one would have liked him on his own principle that 'We can scarcely hate anyone we know'. But Hazlitt has been dead now a hundred years, and it is perhaps a question how far we can know him well enough to overcome those feelings of dislike, both personal and intellectual, which his writings still so sharply arouse. For Hazlitt—it is one of his prime merits—was not one of those noncommittal writers who shuffle off in a mist and die of their own insignificance. His essays are emphatically himself. He has no reticence and he has no shame. He tells us exactly what he thinks, and he tells us—the confidence is less seductive—exactly what he feels. As of all men he had the most intense consciousness of his own existence, since never a day passed without inflicting on him some pang of hate or of jealousy, some thrill of anger or of pleasure, we cannot read him for long without coming in contact with a very singular character—ill-conditioned yet high-minded; mean yet noble; intensely egotistical yet inspired by the most genuine passion for the rights and liberties of mankind.

Soon, so thin is the veil of the essay as Hazlitt wore it, his very look comes before us. We see him as Coleridge saw him, 'brow-hanging, shoe-contemplative, strange'. He comes shuffling into the room, he looks nobody straight in the face, he shakes hands with the fin of a fish; occasionally he darts a malignant glance from his corner. 'His manners are 99 in 100 singularly repulsive', Coleridge said. Yet now and again his face lit up with intellectual beauty, and his manner became radiant with sympathy and understanding. Soon, too, as we read on, we become familiar with the whole gamut of his grudges and his grievances. He lived, one gathers, mostly at inns. No woman's form graced his board. He had quarrelled with all his old friends, save perhaps with Lamb. Yet his only fault had been that he had stuck to his principles and 'not become a government tool'. He was the object of malignant persecution—Blackwood's reviewers called him 'pimply Hazlitt', though his cheek was pale as alabaster. These lies, however, got into print, and then he was afraid to visit his

friends because the footman had read the newspaper and the housemaid tittered behind his back. He had—no one could deny it—one of the finest minds, and he wrote indisputably the best prose style of his time. But what did that avail with women? Fine ladies have no respect for scholars, nor chambermaids either—so the growl and plaint of his grievances keeps breaking through, disturbing us, irritating us; and yet there is something so independent, subtle, fine, and enthusiastic about him—when he can forget himself he is so rapt in ardent speculation about other things—that dislike crumbles and turns to something much warmer and more complex. Hazlitt was right:

It is the mask only that we dread and hate; the man may have something human about him! The notions in short which we entertain of people at a distance, or from partial representation, or from guess-work, are simple, uncompounded ideas, which answer to nothing in reality; those which we derive from experience are mixed modes, the only true and, in general, the most favourable ones.

Certainly no one could read Hazlitt and maintain a simple and uncompounded idea of him. From the first he was a twy-minded man—one of those divided natures which are inclined almost equally to two quite opposite careers. It is significant that his first impulse was not to essay-writing but to painting and philosophy. There was something in the remote and silent art of the painter that offered a refuge to his tormented spirit. He noted enviously how happy the old age of painters was—‘their minds keep alive to the last’; he turned longingly to the calling that takes one out of doors, among fields and woods, that deals with bright pigments, and has solid brush and canvas for its tools and not merely black ink and white paper. Yet at the same time he was bitten by an abstract curiosity that would not let him rest in the contemplation of concrete beauty. When he was a boy of fourteen he heard his father, the good Unitarian minister, dispute with an old lady of the congregation as they were coming out of Meeting as to the limits of religious toleration, and, he said, ‘it was this circumstance that decided the fate of my future life’. It set him off ‘forming in my head . . . the following system of political rights and general jurisprudence’. He wished ‘to be

satisfied of the reason of things'. The two ideals were ever after to clash. To be a thinker and to express in the plainest and most accurate of terms 'the reason of things', and to be a painter gloating over blues and crimsons, breathing fresh air and living sensually in the emotions—these were two different, perhaps incompatible ideals, yet like all Hazlitt's emotions both were tough and each strove for mastery. He yielded now to one, now to the other. He spent months in Paris copying pictures at the Louvre. He came home and toiled laboriously at the portrait of an old woman in a bonnet day after day, seeking by industry and pains to discover the secret of Rembrandt's genius; but he lacked some quality—perhaps it was invention—and in the end cut the canvas to ribbons in a rage or turned it against the wall in despair. At the same time he was writing the 'Essay on the Principles of Human Action' which he preferred to all his other works. For there he wrote plainly and truthfully, without glitter or garishness, without any wish to please or to make money, but solely to gratify the urgency of his own desire for truth. Naturally, 'the book dropped still-born from the press'. Then, too, his political hopes, his belief that the age of freedom had come and that the tyranny of kingship was over, proved vain. His friends deserted to the Government, and he was left to uphold the doctrines of liberty, fraternity, and revolution in that perpetual minority which requires so much self-approval to support it.

Thus he was a man of divided tastes and of thwarted ambition; a man whose happiness, even in early life, lay behind. His mind had set early and bore for ever the stamp of first impressions. In his happiest moods he looked not forwards but backwards—to the garden where he had played as a child, to the blue hills of Shropshire and to all those landscapes which he had seen when hope was still his, and peace brooded upon him and he looked up from his painting or his book and saw the fields and woods as if they were the outward expression of his own inner quietude. It is to the books that he read then that he returns—to Rousseau and to Burke and to the *Letters of Junius*. The impression that they made upon his youthful imagination was never effaced and scarcely overlaid; for after youth was over he ceased to read for pleasure, and youth and the pure and intense pleasures of youth were soon left behind.

Naturally, given his susceptibility to the charms of the other sex, he married; and naturally, given his consciousness of his own 'misshapen form made to be mocked', he married unhappily. Miss Sarah Stoddart pleased him when he met her at the Lambs by the common sense with which she found the kettle and boiled it when Mary absentmindedly delayed. But of domestic talents she had none. Her little income was insufficient to meet the burden of married life, and Hazlitt soon found that instead of spending eight years in writing eight pages he must turn journalist and write articles upon politics and plays and pictures and books of the right length, at the right moment. Soon the mantelpiece of the old house at York Street where Milton had lived was scribbled over with ideas for essays. As the habit proves, the house was not a tidy house, nor did geniality and comfort excuse the lack of order. The Hazlitts were to be found eating breakfast at two in the afternoon, without a fire in the grate or a curtain to the window. A valiant walker and a clear-sighted woman, Mrs. Hazlitt had no delusions about her husband. He was not faithful to her, and she faced the fact with admirable common sense. But 'he said that I had always despised him and his abilities', she noted in her diary, and that was carrying common sense too far. The prosaic marriage came lamely to an end. Free at last from the encumbrance of home and husband, Sarah Hazlitt pulled on her boots and set off on a walking tour through Scotland, while Hazlitt, incapable of attachment or comfort, wandered from inn to inn, suffered tortures of humiliation and disillusionment, but, as he drank cup after cup of very strong tea and made love to the innkeeper's daughter, he wrote those essays that are of course among the very best that we have.

That they are not quite the best—that they do not haunt the mind and remain entire in the memory as the essays of Montaigne or Lamb haunt the mind—is also true. He seldom reaches the perfection of these great writers or their unity. Perhaps it is the nature of these short pieces that they need unity and a mind at harmony with itself. A little jar there makes the whole composition tremble. The essays of Montaigne, Lamb, even Addison, have the reticence which springs from composure, for with all their familiarity they never tell us what they wish to keep hidden. But with Hazlitt it is different. There is always something divided

and discordant even in his finest essays, as if two minds were at work who never succeed save for a few moments in making a match of it. In the first place there is the mind of the inquiring boy who wishes to be satisfied of the reason of things—the mind of the thinker. It is the thinker for the most part who is allowed the choice of the subject. He chooses some abstract idea, like Envy, or Egotism, or Reason and Imagination. He treats it with energy and independence. He explores its ramifications and scales its narrow paths as if it were a mountain road and the ascent both difficult and inspiring. Compared with this athletic progress, Lamb's seems the flight of a butterfly cruising capriciously among the flowers and perching for a second incongruously here upon a barn, there upon a wheelbarrow. But every sentence in Hazlitt carries us forward. He has his end in view and, unless some accident intervenes, he strides towards it in that 'pure conversational prose style' which, as he points out, is so much more difficult to practise than fine writing.

There can be no question that Hazlitt the thinker is an admirable companion. He is strong and fearless; he knows his mind and he speaks his mind forcibly yet brilliantly too, for the readers of newspapers are a dull-eyed race who must be dazzled in order to make them see. But besides Hazlitt the thinker there is Hazlitt the artist. There is the sensuous and emotional man, with his feeling for colour and touch, with his passion for prize-fighting and Sarah Walker, with his sensibility to all those emotions which disturb the reason and make it often seem futile enough to spend one's time slicing things up finer and finer with the intellect when the body of the world is so firm and so warm and demands so imperatively to be pressed to the heart. To know the reason of things is a poor substitute for being able to feel them. And Hazlitt felt with the intensity of a poet. The most abstract of his essays will suddenly glow red-hot or white-hot if something reminds him of his past. He will drop his fine analytic pen and paint a phrase or two with a full brush brilliantly and beautifully if some landscape stirs his imagination or some book brings back the hour when he first read it. The famous passages about reading *Love for Love* and drinking coffee from a silver pot, and reading *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and eating a cold chicken, are known to all, and yet how oddly they often break into the context, how violently

we are switched from reason to rhapsody—how embarrassingly our austere thinker falls upon our shoulders and demands our sympathy! It is this disparity and the sense of two forces in conflict that trouble the serenity and cause the inconclusiveness of some of Hazlitt's finest essays. They set out to give us a proof and they end by giving us a picture. We are about to plant our feet upon the solid rock of Q.E.D., and behold the rock turns to quagmire and we are knee-deep in mud and water and flowers. 'Faces pale as the primrose with hyacinthine locks' are in our eyes; the woods of Tuderly breathe their mystic voices in our ears. Then suddenly we are recalled, and the thinker, austere, muscular, and sardonic, leads us on to analyse, to dissect, and to condemn.

Thus if we compare Hazlitt with the other great masters in his line it is easy to see where his limitations lie. His range is narrow and his sympathies few if intense. He does not open the doors wide upon all experience like Montaigne, rejecting nothing, tolerating everything, and watching the play of the soul with irony and detachment. On the contrary, his mind shut hard with egotistic tenacity upon his first impressions and froze them to unalterable convictions. Nor was it for him to make play, like Lamb, with the figures of his friends, creating them afresh in fantastic flights of imagination and reverie. His characters are seen with the same quick sidelong glance full of shrewdness and suspicion which he darted upon people in the flesh. He does not use the essayist's licence to circle and meander. He is tethered by his egotism and by his convictions to one time and one place and one being. We never forget that this is England in the early days of the nineteenth century; indeed, we feel ourselves in the Southampton Buildings or in the inn parlour that looks over the downs and on to the high road at Winterslow. He has an extraordinary power of making us contemporary with himself. But as we read on through the many volumes which he filled with so much energy and yet with so little love of his task, the comparison with the other essayists drops from us. These are not essays, it seems, independent and self-sufficient, but fragments broken off from some larger book—some searching enquiry into the reason for human actions or into the nature of human institutions. It is only accident that has cut them short, and only deference to the

public taste that has decked them out with gaudy images and bright colours. The phrase which occurs in one form or another so frequently and indicates the structure which if he were free he would follow—‘I will here try to go more at large into the subject and then give such instances and illustrations of it as occur to me’—could by no possibility occur in the *Essays of Elia* or *Sir Roger de Coverley*. He loves to grope among the curious depths of human psychology and to track down the reason of things. He excels in hunting out the obscure causes that lie behind some common saying or sensation, and the drawers of his mind are well stocked with illustrations and arguments. We can believe him when he says that for twenty years he had thought hard and suffered acutely. He is speaking of what he knows from experience when he exclaims, ‘How many ideas and trains of sentiment, long and deep and intense, often pass through the mind in only one day’s thinking or reading!’ Convictions are his life-blood; ideas have formed in him like stalactites, drop by drop, year by year. He has sharpened them in a thousand solitary walks; he has tested them in argument after argument, sitting in his corner, sardonically observant, over a late supper at the Southampton Inn. But he has not changed them. His mind is his own and it is made up.

Thus however threadbare the abstraction—*Hot and Cold*, or *Envy*, or *The Conduct of Life*, or *The Picturesque and the Ideal*—he has something solid to write about. He never lets his brain slacken or trusts to his great gift of picturesque phrasing to float him over a stretch of shallow thought. Even when it is plain from the savagery and contempt with which he attacks his task that he is out of the mood and only keeps his mind to the grindstone by strong tea and sheer force of will, we still find him mordant and searching and acute. There is a stir and trouble, a vivacity and conflict in his essays as if the very contrariety of his gifts kept him on the stretch. He is always hating, loving, thinking, and suffering. He could never come to terms with authority or doff his own idiosyncrasy in deference to opinion. Thus chafed and goaded the level of his essays is extraordinarily high. Often dry, garish in their bright imagery, monotonous in the undeviating energy of their rhythm—for Hazlitt believed too implicitly in his own saying, ‘mediocrity, insipidity, want of character, is the great

fault', to be an easy writer to read for long at a stretch—there is scarcely an essay without its stress of thought, its thrust of insight, its moment of penetration. His pages are full of fine sayings and unexpected turns and independence and originality. 'All that is worth remembering of life is the poetry of it.' 'If the truth were known, the most disagreeable people are the most amiable.' 'You will hear more good things on the outside of a stage-coach from London to Oxford, than if you were to pass a twelve-month with the undergraduates or heads of colleges of that famous University.' We are constantly plucked at by sayings that we would like to put by to examine later.

But besides the volumes of Hazlitt's essays there are the volumes of Hazlitt's criticism. In one way or another, either as lecturer or reviewer, Hazlitt strode through the greater part of English literature and delivered his opinion of the majority of famous books. His criticism has the rapidity and the daring, if it has also the looseness and the roughness, which arise from the circumstances in which it was written. He must cover a great deal of ground, make his points clear to an audience not of readers but of listeners, and has time only to point to the tallest towers and the brightest pinnacles in the landscape. But even in his most perfunctory criticism of books we feel that faculty for seizing on the important and indicating the main outline which learned critics often lose and timid critics never acquire. He is one of those rare critics who have thought so much that they can dispense with reading. It matters very little that Hazlitt had read only one poem by Donne; that he found Shakespeare's sonnets unintelligible; that he never read a book through after he was thirty; that he came indeed to dislike reading altogether. What he had read he had read with fervour. And since in his view it was the duty of a critic to 'reflect the colours, the light and shade, the soul and body of a work', appetite, gusto, enjoyment were far more important than analytic subtlety or prolonged and extensive study. To communicate his own fervour was his aim. Thus he first cuts out with vigorous and direct strokes the figure of one author and contrasts it with another, and next builds up with the freest use of imagery and colour the brilliant ghost that the book has left glimmering in his mind. The poem is re-created in glowing phrases—'A rich distilled perfume emanates from it

like the breath of genius; a golden cloud envelops it; a honeyed paste of poetic diction encrusts it, like the candied coat of the auricula'. But since the analyst in Hazlitt is never far from the surface, this painter's imagery is kept in check by a nervous sense of the hard and lasting in literature, of what a book means and where it should be placed, which models his enthusiasm and gives it angle and outline. He singles out the peculiar quality of his author and stamps it vigorously. There is the 'deep, internal, sustained sentiment' of Chaucer; 'Crabbe is the only poet who has attempted and succeeded in the *still life* of tragedy'. There is nothing flabby, weak, or merely ornamental in his criticism of Scott—sense and enthusiasm run hand in hand. And if such criticism is the reverse of final, if it is initiatory and inspiring rather than conclusive and complete, there is something to be said for the critic who starts the reader on a journey and fires him with a phrase to shoot off on adventures of his own. If one needs an incentive to read Burke, what is better than 'Burke's style was forked and playful like the lightning, crested like the serpent'? Or again, should one be trembling on the brink of a dusty folio, the following passage is enough to plunge one in midstream:

It is delightful to repose on the wisdom of the ancients; to have some great name at hand, besides one's own initials always staring one in the face; to travel out of one's self into the Chaldee, Hebrew, and Egyptian characters; to have the palm-trees waving mystically in the margin of the page, and the camels moving slowly on in the distance of three thousand years. In that dry desert of learning, we gather strength and patience, and a strange and insatiable thirst of knowledge. The ruined monuments of antiquity are also there, and the fragments of buried cities (under which the adder lurks) and cool springs, and green sunny spots, and the whirlwind and the lion's roar, and the shadow of angelic wings.

Needless to say that is not criticism. It is sitting in an armchair and gazing into the fire, and building up image after image of what one has seen in a book. It is loving and taking the liberties of a lover. It is being Hazlitt.

But it is likely that Hazlitt will survive not in his lectures, nor in his travels, nor in his *Life of Napoleon*, nor in his *Conversations of*

Northcote, full as they are of energy and integrity, of broken and fitful splendour and shadowed with the shape of some vast unwritten book that looms on the horizon. He will live in a volume of essays in which is distilled all those powers that are dissipated and distracted elsewhere, where the parts of his complex and tortured spirit come together in a truce of amity and concord. Perhaps a fine day was needed, or a game of fives or a long walk in the country, to bring about this consummation. The body has a large share in everything that Hazlitt writes. Then a mood of intense and spontaneous reverie came over him; he soared into what Patmore called 'a calm so pure and serene that one did not like to interrupt it'. His brain worked smoothly and swiftly and without consciousness of its own operations; the pages dropped without an erasure from his pen. Then his mind ranged in a rhapsody of well-being over books and love, over the past and its beauty, the present and its comfort, and the future that would bring a partridge hot from the oven or a dish of sausages sizzling in the pan.

I look out of my window and see that a shower has just fallen: the fields look green after it, and a rosy cloud hangs over the brow of the hill; a lily expands its petals in the moisture, dressed in its lovely green and white; a shepherd-boy has just brought some pieces of turf with daisies and grass for his young mistress to make a bed for her skylark, not doomed to dip his wings in the dappled dawn—my cloudy thoughts draw off, the storm of angry politics has blown over—Mr. Blackwood, I am yours—Mr. Croker, my service to you—Mr. T. Moore, I am alive and well.

There is then no division, no discord, no bitterness. The different faculties work in harmony and unity. Sentence follows sentence with the healthy ring and chime of a blacksmith's hammer on the anvil; the words glow and the sparks fly; gently they fade and the essay is over. And as his writing had such passages of inspired description, so, too, his life had its seasons of intense enjoyment. When he lay dying a hundred years ago in a lodging in Soho his voice rang out with the old pugnacity and conviction: 'Well, I have had a happy life.' One has only to read him to believe it.

Impassioned Prose¹

WHEN he was still a boy, his own discrimination led De Quincey to doubt whether 'his natural vocation lay towards poetry'. He wrote poetry, eloquently and profusely, and his poetry was praised; but even so he decided that he was no poet, and the sixteen volumes of his collected works are written entirely in prose. After the fashion of his time, he wrote on many subjects --on political economy, on philosophy, on history; he wrote essays and biographies and confessions and memoirs. But as we stand before the long row of his books and make, as we are bound to make after all these years, our own selection, the whole mass and range of these sixteen volumes seems to reduce itself to one sombre level in which hang a few splendid stars. He dwells in our memory because he could make phrases like 'trepidations of innumerable fugitives', because he could compose scenes like that of the laurelled coach driving into the midnight marketplace, because he could tell stories like that of the phantom woodcutter heard by his brother on the desert island. And, if we examine our choice and give a reason for it, we have to confess that, prose writer though he is, it is for his poetry that we read him and not for his prose.

What could be more damaging, to him as writer, to us as readers, than this confession? For if the critics agree on any point it is on this, that nothing is more reprehensible than for a prose writer to write like a poet. Poetry is poetry and prose is prose—how often have we not heard that! Poetry has one mission and prose another. Prose, Mr. Binyon wrote the other day, 'is a medium primarily addressed to the intelligence, poetry to feeling and imagination'. And again, 'the poetical prose has but a bastard kind of beauty, easily appearing overdressed'. It is impossible not to admit, in part at least, the truth of these remarks. Memory supplies but too many instances of discomfort, of anguish, when in the midst of sober prose suddenly the temperature rises, the rhythm changes, we go up with a lurch, come down with a bang,

¹ *Times Literary Supplement*, September 16th, 1926

and wake, roused and angry. But memory supplies also a number of passages—in Browne, in Landor, in Carlyle, in Ruskin, in Emily Brontë—where there is no such jerk, no such sense (for this perhaps is at the root of our discomfort) of something unfused, unwrought, incongruous, and casting ridicule upon the rest. The prose writer has subdued his army of facts; he has brought them all under the same laws of perspective. They work upon our minds as poetry works upon them. We are not woken; we reach the next point—and it may well be highly commonplace—without any sense of strain.

But, unfortunately for those who would wish to see a great many more things said in prose than are now thought proper, we live under the rule of the novelists. If we talk of prose we mean in fact prose fiction. And of all writers the novelist has his hands fullest of facts. Smith gets up, shaves, has his breakfast, taps his egg, reads *The Times*. How can we ask the panting, the perspiring, the industrious scribe with all this on his hands to modulate beautifully off into rhapsodies about Time and Death and what the hunters are doing at the Antipodes? It would upset the whole proportions of his day. It would cast grave doubt upon his veracity. Moreover, the greatest of his order seem deliberately to prefer a method which is the antithesis of prose poetry. A shrug of the shoulders, a turn of the head, a few words spoken in a hurry at a moment of crisis—that is all. But the train has been laid so deep beneath page after page and chapter after chapter that the single word when it is spoken is enough to start an explosion. We have so lived and thought with these men and women that they need only raise a finger and it seems to reach the skies. To elaborate that gesture would be to spoil it. The whole tendency therefore of fiction is against prose poetry. The lesser novelists are not going to take risks which the greater deliberately avoid. They trust that, if only the egg is real and the kettle boils, stars and nightingales will somehow be thrown in by the imagination of the reader. And therefore all that side of the mind which is exposed in solitude they ignore. They ignore its thoughts, its rhapsodies, its dreams, with the result that the people of fiction bursting with energy on one side are atrophied on the other; while prose itself, so long in service to this drastic master, has suffered the same deformity, and will be fit, after

another hundred years of such discipline, to write nothing but the immortal works of Bradshaw and Baedeker.

But happily there are in every age some writers who puzzle the critics, who refuse to go in with the herd. They stand obstinately across the boundary lines, and do a greater service by enlarging and fertilizing and influencing than by their actual achievement, which, indeed, is often too eccentric to be satisfactory. Browning did a service of this kind to poetry. Peacock and Samuel Butler have both had an influence upon novelists which is out of all proportion to their own popularity. And one of De Quincey's claims to our gratitude, one of his main holds upon our interest, is that he was an exception and a solitary. He made a class for himself. He widened the choice for others. Faced with the usual problem of what to write, since write he must, he decided that with all his poetic sensibility he was not a poet. He lacked the fire and the concentration. Nor, again, was he a novelist. With immense powers of language at his command, he was incapable of a sustained and passionate interest in the affairs of other people. It was his disease, he said, 'to meditate too much and to observe too little'. He would follow a poor family who went marketing on a Saturday night, sympathetically, but at a distance. He was intimate with no one. Then, again, he had an extraordinary gift for the dead languages, and a passion for acquiring knowledge of all kinds. Yet there was some quality in him which forbade him to shut himself up alone with his books, as such gifts seemed to indicate. The truth was that he dreamed—he was always dreaming. The faculty was his long before he took to eating opium. When he was a child he stood by his sister's dead body and suddenly

a vault seemed to open in the zenith of the far blue sky, a shaft which ran up for ever. I, in spirit, rose as on billows that also ran up the shaft for ever; and the billows seemed to pursue the throne of God; but that also ran before us and fled away continually.

The visions were of extreme vividness; they made life seem a little dull in comparison; they extended it, they completed it. But in what form was he to express this that was the most real part of his own existence? There was none ready made to his

hand. He invented, as he claimed, 'modes of impassioned prose'. With immense elaboration and art he formed a style in which to express these 'visionary scenes derived from the world of dreams'. For such prose there were no precedents, he believed; and he begged the reader to remember 'the perilous difficulty' of an attempt where 'a single false note, a single word in a wrong key, ruins the whole music'.

Added to that 'perilous difficulty' was another which is often forced upon the reader's attention. A prose writer may dream dreams and see visions, but they cannot be allowed to lie scattered, single, solitary upon the page. So spaced out they die. For prose has neither the intensity nor the self-sufficiency of poetry. It rises slowly off the ground; it must be connected on this side and on that. There must be some medium in which its ardours and ecstasies can float without incongruity, from which they receive support and impetus. Here was a difficulty which De Quincey often faced and often failed to solve. Many of his most tiresome and disfiguring faults are the result of the dilemma into which his genius plunged him. There was something in the story before him which kindled his interest and quickened his powers. For example, the Spanish Military Nun, as she descends half-starved and frozen from the Andes, sees before her a belt of trees which promises safety. As if De Quincey had himself reached that shelter and could breathe in safety, he broadens out—

Oh! verdure of dark olive foliage, offered suddenly to fainting eyes, as if by some winged patriarchal herald of wrath relenting—solitary Arab's tent, rising with saintly signals of peace in the dreadful desert, must Kate indeed die even yet, whilst she sees but cannot reach you? Outpost on the frontier of man's dominions, standing within life, but looking out upon everlasting death, wilt thou hold up the anguish of thy mocking invitation only to betray?

Alas, how easy it is to rise, how dangerous to fall! He has Kate on his hands; he is half-way through with her story; he must rouse himself, he must collect himself, he must descend from these happy heights to the levels of ordinary existence. And, again and again, it is in returning to earth that De Quincey is undone. How is he to bridge the horrid transition? How is he to turn from an angel with wings of flame and eyes of fire to a gentleman in

black who talks sense? Sometimes he makes a joke—it is generally painful. Sometimes he tells a story—it is always irrelevant. Most often he spreads himself out in a waste of verbosity, where any interest that there may have been peters out dismally and loses itself in the sand. We can read no more.

It is tempting to say that De Quincey failed because he was not a novelist. He ought to have left Kate alone; he had not a novelist's sense of character and action. To a critic such formulas are helpful; unfortunately, they are often false. For in fact, De Quincey can convey character admirably; he is a master of the art of narrative once he has succeeded (and the condition is indispensable for all writers) in adjusting the perspective to suit his own eyesight. It was a sight, it is true, that required a most curious rearrangement of the landscape. Nothing must come too close. A veil must be drawn over the multitudinous disorder of human affairs. It must always be possible, without distressing the reader, to allude to a girl as 'a prepossessing young female'. A mist must lie upon the human face. The hills must be higher and the distances bluer than they are in the world we know. He required, too, endless leisure and ample elbow-room. He wanted time to soliloquize and loiter; here to pick up some trifle and bestow upon it all his powers of analysis and decoration; here to brush aside such patient discrimination and widen and enlarge and amplify until nothing remains but the level sands and the immense sea. He wanted a subject that would allow him all possible freedom and yet possess enough emotional warmth to curb his inborn verbosity.

He found it, naturally, in himself. He was a born autobiographer. If the *Opium Eater* remains his masterpiece, a longer and less perfect book, the *Autobiographic Sketches*, runs it very close. For here it is fitting that he should stand a little apart, should look back, under cover of his raised hand, at scenes which had almost melted into the past. His enemy, the hard fact, became cloudlike and supple under his hands. He was under no obligation to recite 'the old hackneyed roll-call, chronologically arranged, of inevitable facts in a man's life'. It was his object to record impressions, to render states of mind without particularizing the features of the precise person who had experienced them. A serene and lovely light lies over the whole of that distant prospect of his

childhood. The house, the fields, the garden, even the neighbouring town of Manchester, all seem to exist, but far away on some island separated from us by a veil of blue. On this background, where no detail is accurately rendered, the little group of children and parents, the little island of home and garden, are all distinctly visible and yet as if they moved and had their being behind a veil. Upon the opening chapters rests the solemnity of a splendid summer's day, whose radiance, long since sunk, has something awful in it, in whose profound stillness sounds strangely reverberate—the sounds of hooves on the far-away high road, the sound of words like 'palm', the sound of that 'solemn wind, the saddest that ear ever heard', which was for ever to haunt the mind of the little boy who now heard it for the first time. Nor, so long as he keeps within the circle of the past, is it necessary that he should face the disagreeable necessity of waking. About the reality of childhood still hung some of the charm of illusion. If the peace is broken, it is by an apparition like that of the mad dog which passes and pauses with something of the terror of a dream. If he needs variety, he finds it in describing with a whimsical humour perfectly suited to the subject the raptures and miseries of childhood. He mocks; he dilates; he makes the very small very great; then he describes the war with the mill hands, the brothers' imaginary kingdoms, his brother's boast that he could walk upon the ceiling like a fly, with admirable particularity. He can rise easily and fall naturally here. Here too, given his own memories to work upon, he can exercise his extraordinary powers of description. He was never exact; he disliked glitter and emphasis; he sacrificed the showy triumphs of the art; but he had to perfection the gift of composition. Scenes come together under his hands like congregations of clouds which gently join and slowly disperse or hang solemnly still. So displayed before us we see the coaches gathering at the post office in all their splendour; the lady in the carriage to whom the news of victory brings only sorrow; the couple surprised on the road at midnight by the thunder of the mail coach and the threat of death; Lamb asleep in his chair; Ann disappearing for ever into the dark London night. All these scenes have something of the soundlessness and the lustre of dreams. They swim up to the surface, they sink down again into the depths. They have, into the bargain, the strange

power of growing in our minds, so that it is always a surprise to come upon them again and see what, in the interval, our minds have done to alter and expand.

Meanwhile, all these scenes compose an autobiography of a kind, but of a kind which is so unusual that one is forced to ask what one has learnt from it about De Quincey in the end. Of facts, scarcely anything. One has been told only what De Quincey wished us to know; and even that has been chosen for the sake of some adventitious quality—as that it fitted in here, or was the right colour to go there—never for its truth. But nevertheless there grows upon us a curious sense of intimacy. It is an intimacy with the mind, and not with the body; yet we cannot help figuring to ourselves, as the rush of eloquence flows, the fragile little body, the fluttering hands, the glowing eyes, the alabaster cheeks, the glass of opium on the table. We can guess that no one so gifted with silver speech, so prone to plunge into reverie and awe, held his own imperturbably among his fellows. We can guess at his evasion and unpunctualities; at the hordes of old papers that littered his room; at the courtesy which excused his inability to abide by the ordinary rules of life; at the overmastering desire that possessed him to wander and dream on the hills alone; at the seasons of gloom and irritability with which he paid for that exquisite fineness of ear that tuned each word to harmony and set each paragraph flowing and following like the waves of the sea. All this we know or guess. But it is odd to reflect how little, after all, we have been admitted to intimacy. In spite of the fact that he talks of confessions and calls the work by which he set most store *Suspiria de Profundis*, he is always self-possessed, secretive, and composed. His confession is not that he has sinned but that he has dreamed. Hence it comes about that his most perfect passages are not lyrical but descriptive. They are not cries of anguish which admit us to closeness and sympathy; they are descriptions of states of mind in which, often, time is miraculously prolonged and space miraculously expanded. When in the *Suspiria de Profundis* he tries to rise straight from the ground and to achieve in a few pages without prelude or sequence his own peculiar effects of majesty and distance, his force is not sufficient to bear him the whole distance. There juts up a comment upon the rules of Eton, a note to remind us that this refers

to the tobacco States of North America, in the midst of 'Levana and Our Ladies of Sorrow', which puts their sweet-tongued phrases sadly out of countenance.

But if he was not a lyric writer, he was undoubtedly a descriptive writer, a reflective writer, who with only prose at his command—an instrument hedged about with restrictions, debased by a thousand common uses—made his way into precincts which are terribly difficult to approach. The breakfast table, he seems to say, is only a temporary apparition which we can think into non-existence, or invest with such associations that even its mahogany legs have their charm. To sit cheek by jowl with our fellows cramped up together is distasteful, indeed repulsive. But draw a little apart, see people in groups, as outlines, and they become at once memorable and full of beauty. Then it is not the actual sight or sound itself that matters, but the reverberations that it makes as it travels through our minds. These are often to be found far away, strangely transformed; but it is only by gathering up and putting together these echoes and fragments that we arrive at the true nature of our experience. So thinking, he altered slightly the ordinary relationships. He shifted the values of familiar things. And this he did in prose, which makes us wonder whether, then, it is quite so limited as the critics say, and ask further whether the prose writer, the novelist, might not capture fuller and finer truths than are now his aim if he ventured into those shadowy regions where De Quincey has been before him.

The Captain's Death Bed¹

THE Captain lay dying on a mattress stretched on the floor of the boudoir room; a room whose ceiling had been painted to imitate the sky, and whose walls were painted with trellis work covered with roses upon which birds were perching. Mirrors had been let into the doors, so that the village people called the room the 'Room of a Thousand Pillars' because of its reflections. It was an August morning as he lay dying; his daughter had brought him a bunch of his favourite flowers - clove pinks and moss roses; and he asked her to take down some words at his dictation: --

'Tis a lovely day [he dictated] and Augusta has just brought me three pinks and three roses, and the bouquet is charming. I have opened the windows and the air is delightful. It is now exactly nine o'clock in the morning, and I am lying on a bed in a place called Langham, two miles from the sea, on the coast of Norfolk. . . . To use the common sense of the word [he went on] I am happy. I have no sense of hunger whatever, or of thirst; my taste is not impaired. . . . After years of casual, and, latterly, months of intense thought, I feel convinced that Christianity is true . . . and that God is love. . . . It is now half-past nine o'clock. World, adieu.

Early in the morning of August 9th, 1848, just about dawn, he died.

But who was the dying man whose thoughts turned to love and roses as he lay among his looking-glasses and his painted birds? Singularly enough, it was a sea captain; and still more singularly it was a sea captain who had been through the multitudinous engagements of the Napoleonic wars, who had lived a crowded life on shore, and who had written a long shelf of books of adventure, full of battle and murder and conquest. His name was Frederick Marryat. Who then was Augusta, the daughter who brought him the flowers? She was one of his eleven children; but of her the only fact that is now known to the public is that once she went ratting with her father and seized an enormous rat--'You must know that our Norfolk rats are quite as large as

well-grown guinea-pigs'—and held on to him with her bare hands much to the amazement of the onlookers and, we may guess, to the admiration of her father, who remarked that his daughters were 'true game'. Then, again, what was Langham? Langham was an estate in Norfolk for which Captain Marryat had exchanged Sussex House over a glass of champagne. And Sussex House was a house at Hammersmith in which he lived while he was equerry to the Duke of Sussex. But here certainty begins to falter. Why he quarrelled with the Duke of Sussex and ceased to be his equerry; why, after an apparently pacific interview with Lord Auckland at the Admiralty he was in such a rage that he broke a blood vessel; why, after having eleven children by his wife, he left her; why, being possessed of a house in the country, he lived in London; why, being the centre of a gay and brilliant society he suddenly shut himself up in the country and refused to budge; why Mrs. B—— refused his love and what were his relations with Mrs. S——; these are questions that we may ask, but that we must ask in vain. For the two little volumes with very large print and very small pages in which his daughter Florence wrote his life refuse to tell us. One of the most active, odd and adventurous lives that any English novelist has ever lived is also one of the most obscure.

Some of the reasons for this obscurity lie on the surface. In the first place there was too much to tell. The Captain began his life as a midshipman in Lord Cochrane's ship the *Impérieuse* in the year 1806. He was then aged fourteen. And here are a few extracts from a private log that he kept in July, 1808, when he was sixteen:—

- 24th Taking guns from the batteries.
- 25th. Burning bridges and dismantling batteries to impede the French
- August 1st. Taking the brass guns from the batteries.
- 15th. Took a French despatch boat off Cette.
- 18th. Took and destroyed a signal post.
- 19th. Blew up a signal post.

So it goes on. Every other day he was cutting out a brig, taking a tower, engaging gunboats, seizing prize ships or being chased by the French. In the first three years of his life at sea he had been in fifty fights; times out of number he jumped into the sea

and rescued a drowning man. Once much against his will, for he could swim like a fish, he was rescued by an old bumboat woman who could also swim like a fish. Later he engaged with so much success in the Burmese War that he was allowed to bear a Burmese gilt war-boat on his arms. Clearly if the extracts from the private log had been expanded it would have swollen to a row of volumes; but how was the private log to be expanded by a lady who had presumably never burnt a bridge, dismantled a battery, or blown out a Frenchman's brains in her life? Very wisely she had recourse to Marshall's Naval Biography and to the Gazette. 'Gazette details', she remarked, 'are proverbially dry, but they are trustworthy.' Therefore the public life is dealt with dryly, if trustworthily.

The private life however remained; and the private life, if we may judge from the names of the friends he had and the money he spent and the quarrels he waged, was as violent and various in its way as the other. But here again reticence prevailed. It was partly that his daughter delayed; almost twenty-four years had passed before she wrote and friends were dead and letters destroyed; and it was partly that she was his daughter, imbued with filial reverence and with the belief also that 'a biographer has no business to meddle with any facts below the surface'. The famous statesman Sir R—— P—— therefore is Sir R—— P——; and Mrs. S—— is Mrs. S——. It is only now and then, almost by accident, that we are startled by a sudden groan—'I have had my swing, tried and tasted everything, and I find that it is vanity'; 'I have been in a peck of troubles—domestic, agricultural, legal and pecuniary'; or just for a moment we are allowed to glance at a scene, 'You reposing on the sofa, C—— sitting by you and I on the footstool' which 'is constantly recurring to my memory as a picture' and has crept into one of the letters. But, as the Captain adds, 'It has all vanished like "air, thin air"'. It has all, or almost all, vanished; and if posterity wants to know about the Captain it must read his books.

That the public still wishes to read his books is proved by the fact that the best known of them, *Peter Simple* and *Jacob Faithful*, were reprinted a few years ago in a handsome big edition, with introductions by Professor Saintsbury and Mr. Michael Sadleir. And the books are quite capable of being read, though nobody is

going to pretend that they are among the masterpieces. They have not struck out any immortal scene or character; they are far from marking an epoch in the history of the novel. The critic with an eye for pedigree can trace the influence of Defoe, Fielding, and Smollett naturally asserting itself in their straightforward pages. It may well be that we are drawn to them for reasons that seem far enough from literature. The sun on the cornfield; the gull following the plough; the simple speech of country people leaning over gates, breeds the desire to cast the skin of a century and revert to those simpler days. But no living writer, try though he may, can bring the past back again, because no living writer can bring back the ordinary day. He sees it through a glass, sentimentally, romantically; it is either too pretty or too brutal; it lacks ordinariness. But the world of 1806 was to Captain Marryat what the world of 1935 is to us at this moment, a middling sort of a place, where there is nothing particular to stare at in the street or to listen to in the language. So to Captain Marryat there was nothing out of the way in a sailor with a pigtail or in a bum-boat woman volleying hoarse English. Therefore the world of 1806 is real to us and ordinary, yet sharp-edged and peculiar. And when the delight of looking at a day that was the ordinary day a century ago is exhausted, we are kept reading by the fact that our critical faculties enjoy whetting themselves upon a book which is not among the classics. When the artist's imagination is working at high pressure it leaves very little trace of his effort; we have to go gingerly on tiptoe among the invisible joins and complete marriages that take place in those high regions. Here it is easier going. Here in these cruder books we get closer to the art of fiction; we see the bones and the muscles and the arteries clearly marked. It is a good exercise in criticism to follow a sound craftsman, not marvellously but sufficiently endowed at his work. And as we read *Peter Simple* and *Jacob Faithful* there can be no doubt that Captain Marryat had in embryo at least most of the gifts that go to make a master. Do we think of him as a mere storyteller for boys? Here is a passage which shows that he could use language with the suggestiveness of a poet; though to get the full effect, as always in fiction, it must be read up to through the emotions of the characters. Jacob is alone after his father's death on the Thames lighter at dawn:

THE CAPTAIN'S DEATH BED

I looked around me—the mist of the morning was hanging over the river. . . . As the sun rose, the mist gradually cleared away; trees, houses and green fields, other barges coming up with the tide, boats passing and repassing, the barking of dogs, the smoke issuing from the various chimneys, all broke upon me by degrees; and I was recalled to the sense that I was in a busy world, and had my own task to perform.

Then if we want a proof that the Captain, for all his sturdiness, had that verbal sensibility which at the touch of a congenial thought lets fly a rocket, here we have a discourse on a nose:

It was not an aquiline nose, nor was it an aquiline nose reversed. It was not a nose snubbed at the extremity, gross, heavy, or carbuncled, or fluting. In all its magnitude of proportions it was an intellectual nose. It was thin, horny, transparent, and sonorous. Its snuffle was consequential, and its sneeze oracular. The very sight of it was impressive; its sound when blown in school hours was ominous.

Such was the nose that Jacob saw looming over him when he woke from his fever to hear the Dominie breathing those strange words, 'Earth, lay light upon the lighter-boy--the lotus, the water lily, that hath been cast on shore to die.' And for pages at a time he writes that terse springy prose which is the natural speech of a school of writers trained to the business of moving a large company briskly from one incident to another over the solid earth. Further, he can create a world; he has the power to set us in the midst of ships and men and sea and sky all vivid, credible, authentic, as we are made suddenly aware when Peter quotes a letter from home and the other side of the scene appears; the solid land, England, the England of Jane Austen, with its parsonages, its country houses, its young women staying at home, its young men gone to sea; and for a moment the two worlds, that are so opposite and yet so closely allied, come together. But perhaps the Captain's greatest gift was his power of drawing character. His pages are full of marked faces. There is Captain Kearney, the magnificent liar; and Captain Horton, who lay in bed all day long; and Mr. Chucks, and Mrs. Trotter who cadges eleven pairs of cotton stockings—they are all drawn vigorously, decisively, from the living face, just as the Captain's pen, we are told, used to dash off caricatures upon a sheet of notepaper.

With all these qualities, then what was there stunted in his equipment? Why does the attention slip and the eye merely register printed words? One reason, of course, is that there are no heights in this level world. Violent and agitated as it is, as full of fights and escapes as Captain Marryat's private log, yet there comes a sense of monotony; the same emotion is repeated; we never feel that we are approaching anything; the end is never a consummation. Again, emphatic and trenchant as his characters are, not one of them rounds and fills to his full size, because some of the elements that go to make character are lacking. A chance sentence suggests why this should be so. 'After this we had a conversation of two hours; but what lovers say is very silly, except to themselves, and the reader need not be troubled with it.' The intenser emotions of the human race are kept out. Love is banished; and when love is banished, other valuable emotions that are allied to her are apt to go too. Humour has to have a dash of passion in it; death has to have something that makes us ponder. But here there is a kind of bright hardness. Though he has a curious love of what is physically disgusting—the face of a child nibbled by fish, a woman's body bloated with gin—he is sexually not so much chaste as prudish, and his morality has the glib slickness of a schoolmaster preaching down to small boys. In short, after a fine burst of pleasure there comes a time when the spell that Captain Marryat lays upon us wears thin, and we see through the veil of fiction facts—facts, it is true, that are interesting in themselves; facts about yawls and jolly boats and how boats going into action are 'fitted to pull with grummets upon iron thole pins'; but their interest is another kind of interest, and as much out of harmony with imagination as a bedroom cupboard is with the dream of someone waking from sleep.

Often in a shallow book, when we wake, we wake to nothing at all; but here when we wake, we wake to the presence of a personage—a retired naval officer with an active mind and a caustic tongue, who as he trundles his wife and family across the Continent in the year 1835 is forced to give expression to his opinions in a diary. Sick though he was of story-writing and bored by a literary life—'If I were not rather in want of money', he tells his mother, 'I certainly would not write any more'—he must express his mind somehow; and his mind was a courageous mind, an

unconventional mind. The Press-gang, he thought an abomination. Why, he asked, do English philanthropists bother about slaves in Africa when English children are working seventeen hours a day in factories? The Game Laws are, in his opinion, a source of much misery to the poor; the law of primogeniture should be altered, and there is something to be said for the Roman Catholic religion. Every kind of topic—politics, science, religion, history—comes into view, but only for a fleeting glance. Whether the diary form was to blame or the jolting of a stage coach, or whether lack of book learning and a youth spent in cutting out brigs is a bad training for the reflective powers, the Captain's mind, as he remarked when he stopped for two hours and had a look at it, 'is like a kaleidoscope'. But no, he added with just self-analysis, it was not like a kaleidoscope; 'for the patterns of kaleidoscopes are regular, and there is very little regularity in my brain, at all events.' He hops from thing to thing. Now he rattles of the history off Liège; next moment he discourses upon reason and instinct; then he considers what degree of pain is inflicted upon fish by taking them with the hook; and then, taking a walk through the streets, it strikes him how very seldom you now meet with a name beginning with X. 'Rest!' he exclaims with reason; 'no, the wheels of a carriage may rest, even the body for a time may rest, but the mind will not.' and so, in an excess of restlessness, he is off to America.

Nor do we catch sight of him again—for the six volumes in which he recorded his opinion of America, though they got him into trouble with the inhabitants, now throw light upon nothing in particular—until his daughter, having shut up her Dictionaries and Gazettes, bethinks her of a few 'vague remembrances'. They are only trifles, she admits, and put together in a very random way, but still she remembers him very vividly. He was five foot ten and weighed fourteen stone, she remembers; he had a deep dimple in his chin, and one of his eyebrows was higher than the other, so that he always wore a look of inquiry. Indeed, he was a very restless man. He would break into his brother's room and wake him in the middle of the night to suggest that they should start at once to Austria and buy a château in Hungary and make their fortunes. But, alas! he never did make his fortune, she recalls. What with his building at Langham, and the great decoy which

he had made on his best grazing land, and other extravagances not easy for a daughter to specify, he left little wealth behind him. He had to keep hard at his writing. He wrote his books sitting at a table in the dining-room, from which he could see the lawn and his favourite bull Ben Brace grazing there. And he wrote so small a hand that the copyist had to stick a pin in to mark the place. Also he was wonderfully neat in his dress, and would have nothing but white china on his breakfast table, and kept sixteen clocks and liked to hear them all strike at once. His children called him 'Baby', though he was a man of violent passions, dangerous to thwart, and often 'very grave' at home.

'These trifles put on paper look sadly insignificant', she concludes. Yet as she rambles on they do in their butterfly way bring back the summer morning and the dying Captain after all his voyages stretched on the mattress in the boudoir room dictating those last words to his daughter about love and roses. 'The more fancifully they were tied together, the better he liked it', she says. Indeed, after his death a bunch of pinks and roses was 'found pressed between his body and the mattress'.

Lockhart's Criticism¹

LOCKHART was not an ambitious man, and, for all his powers, he was, save in one instance, rather careless in the use he made of them. As a young man he was content with the irresponsibilities of anonymous reviewing; and as an older man the same ephemeral occupation suited him well enough, though he pursued it more sedately, less anonymously and from the respectable comfort of an editor's chair. But he held no very exalted view of his mission. The business of reviewers, he said, was 'to think not of themselves, but of their author. . . . This excludes all chance of formal, original, or would-be original disquisition on the part of the journalist.' Hence, though Lockhart must have filled volume upon volume with his reviews, very little of Lockhart is to be found embedded in them. When his editor comes—armed with an admirable introduction—to pick out from the lumber of old *Blackwoods* and *Quarterlies* the true Lockhart himself, she finds, for all her enthusiasm, that one slim volume holds all that can now be saved.²

Yet the work was well worth doing, both because Lockhart had a bold, vivacious mind which leaked into his reviews in spite of his theories, and then again, though Miss Hildyard rates him too highly as a critic, he is a fine sample of a reviewer and serves to show the nature and function of those curious creatures whose lives, if they are as gay and giddy as a gnat's, are also as short. Here is one of them who has got himself, rather against his will, pinned down in a book; and it is highly amusing to look at him for a moment transfixed. His most necessary quality, it would seem, must be that which in other walks of life would be called, respectfully enough, courage. A new and unknown writer is a very dangerous person. Most of them die at a pinch without a gasp but some survive and sting, and their sting can be fatal. When Lockhart, we have to remember, saw ranged on his table the usual new books, their names conveyed nothing to him.

² *Lockhart's Literary Criticism*. With an Introduction and Bibliography. By M. Clive Hildyard

Keats, Hook, Godwin, Shelley, Brontë, Tennyson—who were they? They might be somebodies, but they might more probably, be nobodies. It was for him to make the trial and decide the question. Advancing alone with nothing but his own judgement to support him, the reviewer had need of all his courage, his acuteness, his education. He had to switch as adroitly as he could from one subject to another. Mr. Shelley and Mr. Keats, for example, were both poets, and wrote about Greek myths. Godwin and Brontë—Brontë might possibly be a woman—were both novelists; Jeffrey was a critic; Macaulay an historian; Beckford and Borrow were travellers; Coleridge was a poet again, but at the same time a very different poet from Crabbe; somebody had written a book about heraldry, a Staff surgeon had published his memoirs, General Nott had written about Afghanistan, and there was also a valuable work about a new method of treating dry rot. All had to be read, sorted, placed, marked good or bad, and commended with a label tied round their necks to the attention or neglect of the public. The public who paid to be told what to read would be justly annoyed if they were told to read the wrong things.

Lockhart was well qualified for the business. He was a highly educated man. He had taken a first at Oxford, he had a considerable knowledge of Spanish literature, and he was more widely read than most young men of his age. All this was in his favour, but there were drawbacks. The Lockharts were an old Scottish family; and when you add an Oxford education to a young man of an old Scottish family you are making it very difficult for him to be just to apothecaries, for example, who think they can write poetry, or to Cockneys who have the temerity to talk about the Greeks. Moreover, Lockhart was one of those quick-witted indolent people who, as Sir Walter complained, feel the attractions of 'the gown and slipper garb of life, and live with funny, easy companions' gossiping and telling stories instead of attending to the serious business of life and making a name for themselves. The doors and windows of his study let in rumours, prejudices, odds and ends of unsubstantiated gossip. With it all, however, he had the makings of a prince of reviewers; and those who have a kindly feeling for the race might well feel forebodings when he and his cronies picked up for review one day in 1820 a

new book of poems by John Keats. Keats, Lockhart knew, was a friend of Leigh Hunt, and therefore presumably a Liberal, a Cockney. He knew vaguely that his father had kept livery stables. It was impossible, then, that he should be a gentleman and a scholar. All Lockhart's prejudices were roused and he rushed to his doom—the worst that can befall a reviewer. He committed himself violently, he betrayed himself completely. He tried to snuff out between finger and thumb one of the immortal lights of English literature. For that failure he has been gibbeted ever since. No one who sees him swinging in the wind can help a shudder and a sigh lest the same fate may one of these days be his. After all, new books of poems still appear.

And it is plain, as we turn over the pages of Lockhart's resurrected reviews, that to write about a new book the moment it comes out is a very different matter from writing about it fifty years afterwards. A new book is attached to life by a thousand minute filaments. Life goes on and the filaments break and disappear. But at the moment they ring and resound and set up all kinds of irrelevant responses. Keats was an apothecary and lived in Hampstead, and consorted with Leigh Hunt and the Cockneys: Shelley was an atheist and had irregular views upon marriage; the author of *Jane Eyre* might be a woman, and, if so, was a very coarse one. It is easy to say that these were ephemeral accidents and that Lockhart should have brushed them aside; but they rang loud in his ears, and he could no more have disregarded them and the prejudices of his readers than he could have flung aside his blue dressing-gown and marched down Albemarle Street in a tweed cap and plus fours.

But even so, Lockhart was not so far out as might be expected; in other words, he was very often of the same opinion as we are. He saw the importance of Wordsworth and Coleridge; he welcomed Borrow and Beckford; he placed *Jane Eyre*, in spite of its coarseness, very high. It is true that he predicted a long life for *Zohrab the Hostage*, who has had a short one. Probably because he was a novelist himself his criticism of fiction was erratic, and his enthusiasm for the novels of Godwin and Hook seems to show that they excited his own creative power and thus deflected his critical judgment. Tennyson he bullied with unchastened insolence, but, as Tennyson proved by accepting some of his criticism,

not without acuteness. In short, the case of Lockhart would seem to show that a good reviewer of contemporary work will get the proportions roughly right, but the detail wrong. He will single out from a number of unknown writers those who are going to prove men of substance, but he cannot be certain what qualities are theirs in particular, or how the importance of one compares with the importance of another.

One may regret, since this is so, that Lockhart fixed his mind so much upon contemporaries and did not give himself the benefit of a wider perspective. He might have written with far greater safety and perhaps with far greater authority upon the dead. But he was a diffident man and a fastidious; and he knew that criticism, to be worth anything, requires more effort and more austerity than he was able to command. All the brilliance of Jeffrey, as he perceived, was not enough 'to induce a man of research in the next century to turn over the volumes of his review'. And Gifford, with his 'illnated abuse and cold rancorous raillery . . . is exquisitely formed for the purposes of political objurgation, but not at all for those of gentle and universal criticism'. A reviewer can skim the surface, but there are 'matters of such moment, that it is absolutely impossible to be a great critic while the mind remains unsettled in regard to them'. Because he was aware of this, Lockhart was a good reviewer, and content to remain one. But he was too sceptical, too diffident, too handsome and well bred perhaps; he lived too much under the shadow of Sir Walter Scott, he had too many worries and sorrows and dined out too often to push on into those calm and austere regions where the mind settles down to think things out and has its dwelling in a mood of gentle and universal contemplation. So he was content to go on knocking off articles, and cutting out quotations and leaving them to moulder where they lay. But if his reviews show by their power, their insolence, their very lack of ambition, that he had it in him to do better, they also remind us that there is a virtue in familiarity. We lose something when we have ceased to be able to talk naturally of Johnny Keats, to regret the 'early death of this unfortunate and misguided gentleman' Mr. Shelley. A little of the irreverence with which Lockhart treated the living would do no harm to our more sober estimates of the dead.

*Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights*¹

OF the hundred years that have passed since Charlotte Brontë was born, she, the centre now of so much legend, devotion, and literature, lived but thirty-nine. It is strange to reflect how different those legends might have been had her life reached the ordinary human span. She might have become, like some of her famous contemporaries, a figure familiarly met with in London and elsewhere, the subject of pictures and anecdotes innumerable, the writer of many novels, of memoirs possibly, removed from us well within the memory of the middle-aged in all the splendour of established fame. She might have been wealthy, she might have been prosperous. But it is not so. When we think of her we have to imagine someone who had no lot in our modern world; we have to cast our minds back to the fifties of the last century, to a remote parsonage upon the wild Yorkshire moors. In that parsonage, and on those moors, unhappy and lonely, in her poverty and her exaltation, she remains for ever.

These circumstances, as they affected her character, may have left their traces on her work. A novelist, we reflect, is bound to build up his structure with much very perishable material which begins by lending it reality and ends by cumbering it with rubbish. As we open *Jane Eyre* once more we cannot stifle the suspicion that we shall find her world of imagination as antiquated, mid-Victorian, and out of date as the parsonage on the moor, a place only to be visited by the curious, only preserved by the pious. So we open *Jane Eyre*; and in two pages every doubt is swept clean from our minds.

Folds of scarlet drapery shut in my view to the right hand; to the left were the clear panes of glass, protecting, but not separating me from the drear November day. At intervals, while turning over the leaves of my book, I studied the aspect of that winter afternoon. Afar, it offered a pale blank of mist and cloud; near, a scene of wet lawn and storm-beat shrub, with ceaseless rain sweeping away wildly before a long and lamentable blast.

¹ Written in 1916

There is nothing there more perishable than the moor itself, or more subject to the sway of fashion than the 'long and lamentable blast'. Nor is this exhilaration short-lived. It rushes us through the entire volume, without giving us time to think, without letting us lift our eyes from the page. So intense is our absorption that if someone moves in the room the movement seems to take place not there but up in Yorkshire. The writer has us by the hand, forces us along her road, makes us see what she sees, never leaves us for a moment or allows us to forget her. At the end we are steeped through and through with the genius, the vehemence, the indignation of Charlotte Brontë. Remarkable faces, figures of strong outline and gnarled feature have flashed upon us in passing; but it is through her eyes that we have seen them. Once she is gone, we seek for them in vain. Think of Rochester and we have to think of Jane Eyre. Think of the moor, and again there is Jane Eyre. Think of the drawing-room,¹ even, those 'white carpets on which seemed laid brilliant garlands of flowers', that 'pale Parian mantelpiece' with its Bohemia glass of 'ruby red' and the 'general blending of snow and fire'—what is all that except Jane Eyre?

The drawbacks of being Jane Eyre are not far to seek. Always to be a governess and always to be in love is a serious limitation in a world which is full, after all, of people who are neither one nor the other. The characters of a Jane Austen or of a Tolstoy have a million facets compared with these. They live and are complex by means of their effect upon many different people who serve to mirror them in the round. They move hither and thither whether their creators watch them or not, and the world in which they live seems to us an independent world which we can visit, now that they have created it, by ourselves. Thomas Hardy is more akin to Charlotte Brontë in the power of his

¹ Charlotte and Emily Brontë had much the same sense of colour. '... we saw—ah! it was beautiful— a splendid place carpeted with crimson, and crimson-covered chairs and tables, and a pure white ceiling bordered by gold, a shower of glass drops hanging in silver chains from the centre, and shimmering with little soft tapers' (*Wuthering Heights*). 'Yet it was merely a very pretty drawing-room, and within it a boudoir, both spread with white carpets, on which seemed laid brilliant garlands of flowers; both ceiled with snowy mouldings of white grapes and vine leaves, beneath which glowed in rich contrast crimson couches and ottomans; while the ornaments on the pale Parian mantelpiece were of sparkling Bohemia glass, ruby red; and between the windows large mirrors repeated the general blending of snow and fire' (*Jane Eyre*)

personality and the narrowness of his vision. But the differences are vast. As we read *Jude the Obscure* we are not rushed to a finish; we brood and ponder and drift away from the text in plethoric trains of thought which build up round the characters an atmosphere of question and suggestion of which they are themselves, as often as not, unconscious. Simple peasants as they are, we are forced to confront them with destinies and questionings of the hugest import, so that often it seems as if the most important characters in a Hardy novel are those which have no names. Of this power, of this speculative curiosity, Charlotte Brontë has no trace. She does not attempt to solve the problems of human life; she is even unaware that such problems exist; all her force, and it is the more tremendous for being constricted, goes into the assertion, 'I love', 'I hate', 'I suffer'.

For the self-centred and self-limited writers have a power denied the more catholic and broad-minded. Their impressions are close packed and strongly stamped between their narrow walls. Nothing issues from their minds which has not been marked with their own impress. They learn little from other writers, and what they adopt they cannot assimilate. Both Hardy and Charlotte Brontë appear to have founded their styles upon a stiff and decorous journalism. The staple of their prose is awkward and unyielding. But both with labour and the most obstinate integrity, by thinking every thought until it has subdued words to itself, have forged for themselves a prose which takes the mould of their minds entire; which has, into the bargain, a beauty, a power, a swiftness of its own. Charlotte Brontë, at least, owed nothing to the reading of many books. She never learnt the smoothness of the professional writer, or acquired his ability to stuff and sway his language as he chooses. 'I could never rest in communication with strong, discreet, and refined minds, whether male or female', she writes, as any leader-writer in a provincial journal might have written; but gathering fire and speed goes on in her own authentic voice 'till I had passed the outworks of conventional reserve and crossed the threshold of confidence, and won a place by their hearts' very hearthstone'. It is there that she takes her seat; it is the red and fitful glow of the heart's fire which illumines her page. In other words, we read Charlotte Brontë not for exquisite observation of character—her characters are vigorous and ele-

mentary; not for comedy—hers is grim and crude; not for a philosophic view of life—hers is that of a country parson's daughter; but for her poetry. Probably that is so with all writers who have, as she has, an overpowering personality, so that, as we say in real life, they have only to open the door to make themselves felt. There is in them some untamed ferocity perpetually at war with the accepted order of things which makes them desire to create instantly rather than to observe patiently. This very ardour, rejecting half shades and other minor impediments, wings its way past the daily conduct of ordinary people and allies itself with their more inarticulate passions. It makes them poets, or, if they choose to write in prose, intolerant of its restrictions. Hence it is that both Emily and Charlotte are always invoking the help of nature. They both feel the need of some more powerful symbol of the vast and slumbering passions in human nature than words or actions can convey. It is with a description of a storm that Charlotte ends her finest novel *Villette*. 'The skies hang full and dark—a wrack sails from the west; the clouds cast themselves into strange forms.' So she calls in nature to describe a state of mind which could not otherwise be expressed. But neither of the sisters observed nature accurately as Dorothy Wordsworth observed it, or painted it minutely as Tennyson painted it. They seized those aspects of the earth which were most akin to what they themselves felt or imputed to their characters, and so their storms, their moors, their lovely spaces of summer weather are not ornaments applied to decorate a dull page or display the writer's powers of observation—they carry on the emotion and light up the meaning of the book.

The meaning of a book, which lies so often apart from what happens and what is said and consists rather in some connexion which things in themselves different have had for the writer, is necessarily hard to grasp. Especially this is so when, like the Brontës, the writer is poetic, and his meaning inseparable from his language, and itself rather a mood than a particular observation. *Wuthering Heights* is a more difficult book to understand than *Jane Eyre*, because Emily was a greater poet than Charlotte. When Charlotte wrote she said with eloquence and splendour and passion 'I love', 'I hate', 'I suffer'. Her experience, though more intense, is on a level with our own. But there is no 'I' in *Wuthering*

Heights. There are no governesses. There are no employers. There is love, but it is not the love of men and women. Emily was inspired by some more general conception. The impulse which urged her to create was not her own suffering or her own injuries. She looked out upon a world cleft into gigantic disorder and felt within her the power to unite it in a book. That gigantic ambition is to be felt throughout the novel—a struggle, half thwarted but of superb conviction, to say something through the mouths of her characters which is not merely ‘I love’ or ‘I hate’, but ‘we, the whole human race’ and ‘you, the eternal powers . . .’ the sentence remains unfinished. It is not strange that it should be so; rather it is astonishing that she can make us feel what she had it in her to say at all. It surges up in the half-articulate words of Catherine Earnshaw, ‘If all else perished and *he* remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger; I should not seem part of it’. It breaks out again in the presence of the dead. ‘I see a repose that neither earth nor hell can break, and I feel an assurance of the endless and shadowless hereafter—the eternity they have entered—where life is boundless in its duration, and love in its sympathy and joy in its fulness.’ It is this suggestion of power underlying the apparitions of human nature and lifting them up into the presence of greatness that gives the book its huge stature among other novels. But it was not enough for Emily Brontë to write a few lyrics, to utter a cry, to express a creed. In her poems she did this once and for all, and her poems will perhaps outlast her novel. But she was novelist as well as poet. She must take upon herself a more laborious and a more ungrateful task. She must face the fact of other existences, grapple with the mechanism of external things, build up, in recognizable shape, farms and houses and report the speeches of men and women who existed independently of herself. And so we reach these summits of emotion not by rant or rhapsody but by hearing a girl sing old songs to herself as she rocks in the branches of a tree; by watching the moor sheep crop the turf; by listening to the soft wind breathing through the grass. The life at the farm with all its absurdities and its improbability is laid open to us. We are given every opportunity of comparing *Wuthering Heights* with a real farm and Heathcliff with a real man. How, we are

allowed to ask, can there be truth or insight or the finer shades of emotion in men and women who so little resemble what we have seen ourselves? But even as we ask it we see in Heathcliff the brother that a sister of genius might have seen; he is impossible, we say, but nevertheless no boy in literature has a more vivid existence than his. So it is with the two Catherines; never could women feel as they do or act in their manner, we say. All the same, they are the most lovable women in English fiction. It is as if she could tear up all that we know human beings by, and fill these unrecognizable transparencies with such a gust of life that they transcend reality. Hers, then, is the rarest of all powers. She could free life from its dependence on facts; with a few touches indicate the spirit of a face so that it needs no body; by speaking of the moor make the wind blow and the thunder roar.

David Copperfield¹

LIKE the ripening of strawberries, the swelling of apples, and all other natural processes, new editions of Dickens—cheap, pleasant-looking, well printed—are born into the world and call for no more notice than the season's plums and strawberries, save when by some chance the emergence of one of these masterpieces in its fresh green binding suggests an odd and overwhelming enterprise—that one should read *David Copperfield* for the second time. There is perhaps no person living who can remember reading *David Copperfield* for the first time. Like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Grimm's Fairy Tales* and the *Waverley Novels*, *Pickwick* and *David Copperfield* are not books, but stories communicated by word of mouth in those tender years when fact and fiction merge, and thus belong to the memories and myths of life, and not to its aesthetic experience. When we lift it from this hazy atmosphere, when we consider it as a book, bound and printed and ordered by the rules of art, what impression does *David Copperfield* make upon us? As Peggotty and Barkis, the rooks and the workbox with the picture of St. Paul's, Traddles who drew skeletons, the donkeys who would cross the green, Mr. Dick and the Memorial, Betsey Trotwood and Jip and Dora and Agnes and the Heeps and the Micawbers once more come to life with all their appurtenances and peculiarities, are they still possessed of the old fascination or have they in the interval been attacked by that parching wind which blows about books and, without our reading them, remodels them and changes their features while we sleep? The rumour about Dickens is to the effect that his sentiment is disgusting and his style commonplace; that in reading him every refinement must be hidden and every sensibility kept under glass; but that with these precautions and reservations he is of course Shakespearian; like Scott, a born creator; like Balzac, prodigious in his fecundity; but, rumour adds, it is strange that while one reads Shakespeare and one reads Scott, the precise moment for reading Dickens seldom comes our way.

This last charge may be resolved into this—that he lacks

¹ Written in 1925

charm and idiosyncrasy, is everybody's writer and no one's in particular, is an institution, a monument, a public thoroughfare trodden dusty by a million feet. It is based largely upon the fact that of all great writers Dickens is both the least personally charming and the least personally present in his books. No one has ever loved Dickens as he loves Shakespeare and Scott. Both in his life and in his work the impression that he makes is the same. He has to perfection the virtues conventionally ascribed to the male; he is self-assertive, self-reliant, self-assured; energetic in the extreme. His message, when he parts the veil of the story and steps forward in person, is plain and forcible; he preaches the value of 'plain hardworking qualities', of punctuality, order, diligence, of doing what lies before one with all one's might. Agitated as he was by the most violent passions, ablaze with indignation, teeming with queer characters, unable to keep the dreams out of his head at night, nobody appears, as we read him, more free from the foibles and eccentricities and charms of genius. He comes before us, as one of his biographers described him, 'like a prosperous sea captain', stalwart, weather-beaten, self-reliant, with a great contempt for the finicky, the inefficient, or the effeminate. His sympathies indeed have strict limitations. Speaking roughly, they fail him whenever a man or woman has more than two thousand a year, has been to the university, or can count his ancestors back to the third generation. They fail him when he has to treat of the mature emotions—the seduction of Emily, for example, or the death of Dora; whenever it is no longer possible to keep moving and creating, but it is necessary to stand still and search into things and penetrate to the depths of what is there. Then, indeed, he fails grotesquely, and the pages in which he describes what in our convention are the peaks and pinnacles of human life, the explanation of Mrs. Strong, the despair of Mrs. Steerforth, or the anguish of Ham, are of an indescribable unreality—of that uncomfortable complexion which, if we heard Dickens talking so in real life, would either make us blush to the roots of our hair or dash out of the room to conceal our laughter. '... Tell him then,' says Emily, 'that when I hear the wind blowing at night I feel as if it was passing angrily from seeing him and uncle, and was going up to God against me.' Miss Dartle raves—about carrion and pollution and earthworms, and worthless spangles and broken

toys, and how she will have Emily 'proclaimed on the common stair'. The failure is akin to that other failure to think deeply, to describe beautifully. Of the men who go to make up the perfect novelist and should live in amity under his hat, two—the poet and the philosopher—failed to come when Dickens called them.

But the greater the creator the more derelict the regions where his powers fail him; all about their fertile lands are deserts where not a blade of grass grows, swamps where the foot sinks deep in mud. Nevertheless, while we are under their spell these great geniuses make us see the world any shape they choose. We remodel our psychological geography when we read Dickens; we forget that we have ever felt the delights of solitude or observed with wonder the intricate emotions of our friends, or luxuriated in the beauty of nature. What we remember is the ardour, the excitement, the humour, the oddity of people's characters; the smell and savour and soot of London; the incredible coincidences which hook the most remote lives together; the city, the law courts; this man's nose, that man's limp; some scene under an archway or on the high road; and above all some gigantic and dominating figure, so stuffed and swollen with life that he does not exist singly and solitarily, but seems to need for his own realization a host of others, to call into existence the severed parts that complete him, so that wherever he goes he is the centre of conviviality and merriment and punch-making; the room is full, the lights are bright; there are Mrs. Micawber, the twins, Traddles, Betsey Trotwood—all in full swing.

This is the power which cannot fade or fail in its effect—the power not to analyse or to interpret, but to produce, apparently without thought or effort or calculation of the effect upon the story, characters who exist not in detail, not accurately or exactly, but abundantly in a cluster of wild and yet extraordinarily revealing remarks, bubble climbing on the top of bubble as the breath of the creator fills them. And the fecundity and apparent irreflectiveness have a strange effect. They make creators of us, and not merely readers and spectators. As we listen to Micawber pouring himself forth and venturing perpetually some new flight of astonishing imagination, we see, unknown to Mr. Micawber, into the depths of his soul. We say, as Dickens himself says while Micawber holds forth: 'How wonderfully like

Mr. Micawber that is!' Why trouble, then, if the scenes where emotion and psychology are to be expected fail us completely? Subtlety and complexity are all there if we know where to look for them, if we can get over the surprise of finding them—as it seems to us, who have another convention in these matters—in the wrong places. As a creator of character his peculiarity is that he creates wherever his eyes rest—he has the visualizing power in the extreme. His people are branded upon our eyeballs before we hear them speak, by what he sees them doing, and it seems as if it were the sight that sets his thought in action. He saw Uriah Heep 'breathing into the pony's nostrils and immediately covering them with his hand'; he saw David Copperfield looking in the glass to see how red his eyes were after his mother's death; he saw oddities and blemishes, gestures and incidents, scars, eyebrows, everything that was in the room, in a second. His eye brings in almost too rich a harvest for him to deal with, and gives him an aloofness and a hardness which freeze his sentimentalism and make it seem a concession to the public, a veil thrown over the penetrating glance which left to itself pierced to the bone. With such a power at his command Dickens made his books blaze up, not by tightening the plot or sharpening the wit, but by throwing another handful of people upon the fire. The interest flags and he creates Miss Mowcher, completely alive, equipped in every detail as if she were to play a great part in the story, whereas once the dull stretch of road is passed by her help, she disappears; she is needed no longer. Hence a Dickens novel is apt to become a bunch of separate characters loosely held together, often by the most arbitrary conventions, who tend to fly asunder and split our attention into so many different parts that we drop the book in despair. But that danger is surmounted in *David Copperfield*. There, though characters swarm and life flows into every creek and cranny, some common feeling—youth, gaiety, hope—envelops the tumult, brings the scattered parts together, and invests the most perfect of all the Dickens novels with an atmosphere of beauty.¹

¹ The following letter by Virginia Woolf appears in *The Nation* of September 12th, 1925:

SIR,

Fear of a sudden death very naturally distracted Kappa's mind from my article on *David Copperfield* or he would, I think, have taken my meaning. That nobody can

remember reading *David Copperfield* for the first time is a proof not, as he infers, that the reading makes so little impression that it slips off the mind unremembered, but that *David Copperfield* takes such rank among our classics and is a book of such astonishing vividness that parents will read it aloud to their children before they can quite distinguish fact from fiction, and they will never in later life be able to recall the first time they read it. *Grimm's Fairy Tales* and *Robinson Crusoe* are for many people in the same case.

Questions of affection are of course always disputable. I can only reiterate that while I would cheerfully become Shakespeare's cat, Scott's pig, or Keats's canary, if by so doing I could share the society of these great men, I would not cross the road (reasons of curiosity apart) to dine with Wordsworth, Byron, or Dickens. Yet I venerate their genius; and my tears would certainly help to swell the 'unparalleled flow of popular grief' at their deaths. It only means that writers have characters apart from their books, which are sympathetic to some, antipathetic to others. And I maintain that if it could be put to the vote, Which do you prefer as man, Shakespeare, Scott, or Dickens? Shakespeare would be first, Scott second, and Dickens nowhere at all.

Yours, etc.,

VIRGINIA WOOLF

George Eliot

TO read George Eliot attentively is to become aware how little one knows about her. It is also to become aware of the credulity, not very creditable to one's insight, with which, half consciously and partly maliciously, one had accepted the late Victorian version of a deluded woman who held phantom sway over subjects even more deluded than herself. At what moment and by what means her spell was broken it is difficult to ascertain. Some people attribute it to the publication of her *Life*. Perhaps George Meredith, with his phrase about the 'mercurial little showman' and the 'errant woman' on the daïs, gave point and poison to the arrows of thousands incapable of aiming them so accurately, but delighted to let fly. She became one of the butts for youth to laugh at, the convenient symbol of a group of serious people who were all guilty of the same idolatry and could be dismissed with the same scorn. Lord Acton had said that she was greater than Dante; Herbert Spencer exempted her novels, as if they were not novels, when he banned all fiction from the London Library. She was the pride and paragon of her sex. Moreover, her private record was not more alluring than her public. Asked to describe an afternoon at the Priory, the storyteller always intimated that the memory of those serious Sunday afternoons had come to tickle his sense of humour. He had been so much alarmed by the grave lady in her low chair; he had been so anxious to say the intelligent thing. Certainly, the talk had been very serious, as a note in the fine clear hand of the great novelist bore witness. It was dated on the Monday morning, and she accused herself of having spoken without due forethought of Marivaux when she meant another; but no doubt, she said, her listener had already supplied the correction. Still, the memory of talking about Marivaux to George Eliot on a Sunday afternoon was not a romantic memory. It had faded with the passage of the years. It had not become picturesque.

Indeed, one cannot escape the conviction that the long, heavy face with its expression of serious and sullen and almost equine power has stamped itself depressingly upon the minds of people

who remember George Eliot, so that it looks out upon them from her pages. Mr. Gosse has lately described her as he saw her driving through London in a victoria:

a large, thick-set sybil, dreamy and immobile, whose massive features, somewhat grim when seen in profile, were incongruously bordered by a hat, always in the height of Paris fashion, which in those days commonly included an immense ostrich feather.

Lady Ritchie, with equal skill, has left a more intimate indoor portrait:

She sat by the fire in a beautiful black satin gown, with a green-shaded lamp on the table beside her, where I saw German books lying and pamphlets and ivory paper-cutters. She was very quiet and noble, with two steady little eyes and a sweet voice. As I looked I felt her to be a friend, not exactly a personal friend, but a good and benevolent impulse.

A scrap of her talk is preserved. 'We ought to respect our influence,' she said. 'We know by our own experience how very much others affect our lives, and we must remember that we in turn must have the same effect upon others.' Jealously treasured, committed to memory, one can imagine recalling the scene, repeating the words, thirty years later and suddenly, for the first time, bursting into laughter.

In all these records one feels that the recorder, even when he was in the actual presence, kept his distance and kept his head, and never read the novels in later years with the light of a vivid, or puzzling, or beautiful personality dazzling in his eyes. In fiction, where so much of personality is revealed, the absence of charm is a great lack; and her critics, who have been, of course, mostly of the opposite sex, have resented, half consciously perhaps, her deficiency in a quality which is held to be supremely desirable in women. George Eliot was not charming; she was not strongly feminine; she had none of those eccentricities and inequalities of temper which give to so many artists the endearing simplicity of children. One feels that to most people, as to Lady Ritchie, she

was 'not exactly a personal friend, but a good and benevolent impulse'. But if we consider these portraits more closely we shall find that they are all the portraits of an elderly celebrated woman, dressed in black satin, driving in her victoria, a woman who has been through her struggle and issued from it with a profound desire to be of use to others, but with no wish for intimacy, save with the little circle who had known her in the days of her youth. We know very little about the days of her youth; but we do know that the culture, the philosophy, the fame, and the influence were all built upon a very humble foundation--she was the granddaughter of a carpenter.

The first volume of her life is a singularly depressing record. In it we see her raising herself with groans and struggles from the intolerable boredom of petty provincial society (her father had risen in the world and become more middle class, but less picturesque) to be the assistant editor of a highly intellectual London review, and the esteemed companion of Herbert Spencer. The stages are painful as she reveals them in the sad soliloquy in which Mr. Cross condemned her to tell the story of her life. Marked in early youth as one 'sure to get something up very soon in the way of a clothing club', she proceeded to raise funds for restoring a church by making a chart of ecclesiastical history; and that was followed by a loss of faith which so disturbed her father that he refused to live with her. Next came the struggle with the translation of Strauss, which, dismal and 'soul-stupefying' in itself, can scarcely have been made less so by the usual feminine tasks of ordering a household and nursing a dying father, and the distressing conviction, to one so dependent upon affection, that by becoming a blue-stocking she was forfeiting her brother's respect. 'I used to go about like an owl', she said, 'to the great disgust of my brother.' 'Poor thing', wrote a friend who saw her toiling through Strauss with a statue of the risen Christ in front of her, 'I do pity her sometimes, with her pale sickly face and dreadful headaches, and anxiety, too, about her father.' Yet, though we cannot read the story without a strong desire that the stages of her pilgrimage might have been made, if not more easy, as least more beautiful, there is a dogged determination in her advance upon the citadel of culture which raises it above our pity. Her development was very slow and very awkward, but it had the irresistible impetus

behind it of a deep-seated and noble ambition. Every obstacle at length was thrust from her path. She knew everyone. She read everything. Her astonishing intellectual vitality had triumphed. Youth was over, but youth had been full of suffering. Then, at the age of thirty-five, at the height of her powers, and in the fullness of her freedom, she made the decision which was of such profound moment to her and still matters even to us, and went to Weimar, alone with George Henry Lewes.

The books which followed so soon after her union testify in the fullest manner to the great liberation which had come to her with personal happiness. In themselves they provide us with a plentiful feast. Yet at the threshold of her literary career one may find in some of the circumstances of her life influences that turned her mind to the past, to the country village, to the quiet and beauty and simplicity of childish memories and away from herself and the present. We understand how it was that her first book was *Scenes of Clerical Life*, and not *Middlemarch*. Her union with Lewes had surrounded her with affection, but in view of the circumstances and of the conventions it had also isolated her. 'I wish it to be understood', she wrote in 1857, 'that I should never invite anyone to come and see me who did not ask for the invitation.' She had been 'cut off from what is called the world', she said later, but she did not regret it. By becoming thus marked, first by circumstances and later, inevitably, by her fame, she lost the power to move on equal terms unnoted among her kind; and the loss for a novelist was serious. Still, basking in the light and sunshine of *Scenes of Clerical Life*, feeling the large mature mind spreading itself with a luxurious sense of freedom in the world of her 'remotest past', to speak of loss seems inappropriate. Everything to such a mind was gain. All experience filtered down through layer after layer of perception and reflection, enriching and nourishing. The utmost we can say, in qualifying her attitude towards fiction by what little we know of her life, is that she had taken to heart certain lessons not usually learnt early, if learnt at all, among which, perhaps, the most branded upon her was the melancholy virtue of tolerance; her sympathies are with the everyday lot, and play most happily in dwelling upon the home-spun of ordinary joys and sorrows. She has none of that romantic intensity which is connected with a sense of one's own individu-

ality, unsated and unsubdued, cutting its shape sharply upon the background of the world. What were the loves and sorrows of a snuffy old clergyman, dreaming over his whisky, to the fiery egotism of Jane Eyre? The beauty of those first books, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, is very great. It is impossible to estimate the merit of the Poysers, the Dodsons, the Gilfils, the Bartons, and the rest with all their surroundings and dependencies, because they have put on flesh and blood and we move among them, now bored, now sympathetic, but always with that unquestioning acceptance of all that they say and do, which we accord to the great originals only. The flood of memory and humour which she pours so spontaneously into one figure, one scene after another, until the whole fabric of ancient rural England is revived, has so much in common with a natural process that it leaves us with little consciousness that there is anything to criticise. We accept; we feel the delicious warmth and release of spirit which the great creative writers alone procure for us. As one comes back to the books after years of absence they pour out, even against our expectation, the same store of energy and heat, so that we want more than anything to idle in the warmth as in the sun beating down from the red orchard wall. If there is an element of unthinking abandonment in thus submitting to the humours of Midland farmers and their wives, that, too, is right in the circumstances. We scarcely wish to analyse what we feel to be so large and deeply human. And when we consider how distant in time the world of Shepperton and Hayslope is, and how remote the minds of farmer and agricultural labourers from those of most of George Eliot's readers, we can only attribute the ease and pleasure with which we ramble from house to smithy, from cottage parlour to rectory garden, to the fact that George Eliot makes us share their lives, not in a spirit of condescension or of curiosity, but in a spirit of sympathy. She is no satirist. The movement of her mind was too slow and cumbersome to lend itself to comedy. But she gathers in her large grasp a great bunch of the main elements of human nature and groups them loosely together with a tolerant and wholesome understanding which, as one finds upon re-reading, has not only kept her figures fresh and free, but has given them an unexpected hold upon our laughter and tears. There is the famous Mrs. Poyser. It

would have been easy to work her idiosyncrasies to death, and, as it is, perhaps, George Eliot gets her laugh in the same place a little too often. But memory, after the book is shut, brings out, as sometimes in real life, the details and subtleties which some more salient characteristic has prevented us from noticing at the time. We recollect that her health was not good. There were occasions upon which she said nothing at all. She was patience itself with a sick child. She doted upon Totty. Thus one can muse and speculate about the greater number of George Eliot's characters and find, even in the least important, a roominess and margin where those qualities lurk which she has no call to bring from their obscurity.

But in the midst of all this tolerance and sympathy there are, even in the early books, moments of greater stress. Her humour has shown itself broad enough to cover a wide range of fools and failures, mothers and children, dogs and flourishing midland fields, farmers, sagacious or fuddled over their ale, horse-dealers, inn-keepers, curates, and carpenters. Over them all broods a certain romance, the only romance that George Eliot allowed herself—the romance of the past. The books are astonishingly readable and have no trace of pomposity or pretence. But to the reader who holds a large stretch of her early work in view it will become obvious that the mist of recollection gradually withdraws. It is not that her power diminishes, for, to our thinking, it is at its highest in the mature *Middlemarch*, the magnificent book which with all its imperfections is one of the few English novels written for grown-up people. But the world of fields and farms no longer contents her. In real life she had sought her fortunes elsewhere; and though to look back into the past was calming and consoling, there are, even in the early works, traces of that troubled spirit, that exacting and questioning and baffled presence who was George Eliot herself. In *Adam Bede* there is a hint of her in Dinah. She shows herself far more openly and completely in Maggie in *The Mill on the Floss*. She is Janet in *Janet's Repentance*, and Romola, and Dorothea seeking wisdom and finding one scarcely knows what in marriage with Ladislaw. Those who fall foul of George Eliot do so, we incline to think, on account of her heroines; and with good reason; for there is no doubt that they bring out the worst of her, lead her into difficult places, make her

self-conscious, didactic, and occasionally vulgar. Yet if you could delete the whole sisterhood you would leave a much smaller and a much inferior world, albeit a world of greater artistic perfection and far superior jollity and comfort. In accounting for her failure, in so far as it was a failure, one recollects that she never wrote a story until she was thirty-seven, and that by the time she was thirty-seven she had come to think of herself with a mixture of pain and something like resentment. For long she preferred not to think of herself at all. Then, when the first flush of creative energy was exhausted and self-confidence had come to her, she wrote more and more from the personal standpoint, but she did so without the unhesitating abandonment of the young. Her self-consciousness is always marked when her heroines say what she herself would have said. She disguised them in every possible way. She granted them beauty and wealth into the bargain; she invented, more improbably, a taste for brandy. But the disconcerting and stimulating fact remained that she was compelled by the very power of her genius to step forth in person upon the quiet bucolic scene.

The noble and beautiful girl who insisted upon being born into the Mill on the Floss is the most obvious example of the ruin which a heroine can strew about her. Humour controls her and keeps her lovable so long as she is small and can be satisfied by eloping with the gipsies or hammering nails into her doll; but she develops; and before George Eliot knows what has happened she has a full-grown woman on her hands demanding what neither gipsies, nor dolls, nor St. Ogg's itself is capable of giving her. First Philip Wakem is produced, and later Stephen Guest. The weakness of the one and the coarseness of the other have often been pointed out; but both, in their weakness and coarseness, illustrate not so much George Eliot's inability to draw the portrait of a man, as the uncertainty, the infirmity, and the fumbling which shook her hand when she had to conceive a fit mate for a heroine. She is in the first place driven beyond the home world she knew and loved, and forced to set foot in middle-class drawing-rooms where young men sing all the summer morning and young women sit embroidering smoking-caps for bazaars. She feels herself out of her element, as her clumsy satire of what she calls 'good society' proves.

Good society has its claret and its velvet carpets, its dinner engagements six weeks deep, its opera, and its faëry ball rooms . . . gets its science done by Faraday and its religion by the superior clergy who are to be met in the best houses; how should it have need of belief and emphasis?

There is no trace of humour or insight there, but only the vindictiveness of a grudge which we feel to be personal in its origin. But terrible as the complexity of our social system is in its demands upon the sympathy and discernment of a novelist straying across the boundaries, Maggie Tulliver did worse than drag George Eliot from her natural surroundings. She insisted upon the introduction of the great emotional scene. She must love; she must despair; she must be drowned clasping her brother in her arms. The more one examines the great emotional scenes the more nervously one anticipates the brewing and gathering and thickening of the cloud which will burst upon our heads at the moment of crisis in a shower of disillusionment and verbosity. It is partly that her hold upon dialogue, when it is not dialect, is slack; and partly that she seems to shrink with an elderly dread of fatigue from the effort of emotional concentration. She allows her heroines to talk too much. She has little verbal felicity. She lacks the unerring taste which chooses one sentence and compresses the heart of the scene within that. 'Whom are you going to dance with?' asked Mr. Knightley, at the Weston's ball. 'With you, if you will ask me,' said Emma; and she has said enough. Mrs. Casaubon would have talked for an hour and we should have looked out of the window.

Yet, dismiss the heroines without sympathy, confine George Eliot to the agricultural world of her 'remotest past', and you not only diminish her greatness but lose her true flavour. That greatness is here we can have no doubt. The width of the prospect, the large strong outlines of the principal features, the ruddy light of the early books, the searching power and reflective richness of the later tempt us to linger and expatiate beyond our limits. But it is upon the heroines that we would cast a final glance. 'I have always been finding out my religion since I was a little girl,' says Dorothea Casaubon. 'I used to pray so much—now I hardly ever pray. I try not to have desires merely for myself. . . .' She is speaking for them all. That is their problem. They cannot live

without religion, and they start out on the search for one when they are little girls. Each has the deep feminine passion for goodness, which makes the place where she stands in aspiration and agony the heart of the book—still and cloistered like a place of worship, but that she no longer knows to whom to pray. In learning they seek their goal; in the ordinary tasks of womanhood; in the wider service of their kind. They do not find what they seek, and we cannot wonder. The ancient consciousness of woman, charged with suffering and sensibility, and for so many ages dumb, seems in them to have brimmed and overflowed and uttered a demand for something—they scarcely know what—for something that is perhaps incompatible with the facts of human existence. George Eliot had far too strong an intelligence to tamper with those facts, and too broad a humour to mitigate the truth because it was a stern one. Save for the supreme courage of their endeavour, the struggle ends, for her heroines, in tragedy, or in a compromise that is even more melancholy. But their story is the incomplete version of the story of George Eliot herself. For her, too, the burden and the complexity of womanhood were not enough; she must reach beyond the sanctuary and pluck for herself the strange bright fruits of art and knowledge. Claspings them as few women have ever clasped them, she would not renounce her own inheritance—the difference of view, the difference of standard—nor accept an inappropriate reward. Thus we behold her, a memorable figure, inordinately praised and shrinking from her fame, despondent, reserved, shuddering back into the arms of love as if there alone were satisfaction and, it might be, justification, at the same time reaching out with ‘a fastidious yet hungry ambition’ for all that life could offer the free and inquiring mind and confronting her feminine aspirations with the real world of men. Triumphant was the issue for her, whatever it may have been for her creations, and as we recollect all that she dared and achieved, how with every obstacle against her—sex and health and convention—she sought more knowledge and more freedom till the body, weighted with its double burden, sank worn out, we must lay upon her grave whatever we have it in our power to bestow of laurel and rose.

Ruskin

WHAT did our fathers of the nineteenth century do to deserve so much scolding? That is a question which we find ourselves asking sometimes as we dip here and there into the long row of volumes which bear the names of Carlyle and Ruskin. And if we also dip into the lives of those great men we shall find evidence that our fathers were a good deal responsible for the tone which their teachers adopted towards them. There can be no doubt that they liked their great men to be isolated from the rest of the world. Genius was nearly as antisocial and demanded almost as drastic a separation from the ordinary works and duties of mankind as insanity. Accordingly, the great man of that age had much temptation to withdraw to his pinnacle and become a prophet, denouncing a generation from whose normal activities he was secluded. When Carlyle expressed his readiness to work somewhere in a public office, no such place was found for him, and for the rest of his life he was left to grind out book after book with a bitter consciousness within him that such was not the most venerable of lives. All the worship that was offered could not sweeten what wiser treatment might have entirely blotted out. Ruskin started from the opposite pole as far as circumstances were concerned, but he too drifted into the same isolation, and he leaves us convinced that of the two, his was the sadder life.

Yet if all the fairies had conspired together at his birth to protect this man of genius and foster him to the utmost, what more could they have done? He had wealth and comfort and opportunity from the very first. While he was still a boy his genius was recognized, and he had only to publish his first book to become one of the most famous men of the day at the age of twenty-four. But the fairies after all did not give him the gifts he wanted. If one had seen Ruskin about the year 1869, according to Professor Norton, 'you would tell me that you had never seen so sad a man, never one whose nature seemed to have been so sensitized to pain by the experience of life.' This surpassing gift of eloquence, in the first place, brought him far more of evil than of good. Still, after sixty years or so, the style in which page after page of *Modern*

Painters is written takes our breath away. We find ourselves marvelling at the words, as if all the fountains of the English language had been set playing in the sunlight for our pleasure, but it seems scarcely fitting to ask what meaning they have for us. After a time, falling into a passion with this indolent pleasure-loving temper in his readers, Ruskin checked his fountains, and curbed his speech to the very spirited, free, and almost colloquial English in which *Fors Clavigera* and *Praeterita* are written. In these changes, and in the restless play of his mind upon one subject after another, there is something, we scarcely know how to define it, of the wealthy and cultivated amateur, full of fire and generosity and brilliance, who would give all he possesses of wealth and brilliance to be taken seriously, but who is fated to remain for ever an outsider. As we read these outbursts of rather petulant eloquence, we find ourselves remembering the sheltered and luxurious life, and even when we are very ignorant of the subject, the tremendous arrogance and self-confidence seem to result not from knowledge, but from a tossing and splendid impatience of spirit which is not to be broken into the drudgery of learning. We remember how for years after most men are forced to match themselves with the real world 'he was living in a world of his own', to quote Professor Norton again, and losing the chance of gaining that experience with practical life, that self-control, and that development of reason which he more than most men required. If we reflect, too, that from his childhood, when he stood up among the cushions and preached, 'People be good,' the passion of his life was to teach and reform, it is easy to understand how terribly and, as it must have seemed sometimes, how futilely 'he hurt himself against life and the world'.

But we do him much wrong if we take him merely as a prophet—a proceeding that is rather forced upon one by his followers—and forget to read his books. For if anyone is able to make his readers feel that he is alive, wrong-headed, intemperate, interesting, and lovable, that writer is Ruskin. His eagerness about everything in the world is perhaps as valuable as the concentration which in another sphere produced the works of Darwin, or the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. It may be that, if we submitted his works on art to a modern art critic, or his works on economy to a modern economist, we should find that there is very

little in them which is accepted by the present generation. Even an unprofessional reader, who picks up *Modern Painters* attracted very much by the bright patches of eloquence, is fairly startled by some of the statements concerning art and morality which are laid down with the usual air of infallibility and the usual array of polysyllables. Nor is it easy for one reading industriously in the six volumes of *Fors Clavigera* to find out precisely how it is that we are to save ourselves, though it is plain enough that we are all damned. Nevertheless, though his æsthetics may be wrong and his economics amateurish, you have to reckon with a force which is not to be suppressed by a whole pyramid of faults. That is why perhaps people in his lifetime got into the habit of calling him Master. He was possessed by a spirit of enthusiasm which compels those who are without it either to attack or to applaud; but beneath its influence they cannot remain merely passive. Even now the straight free lashing of *Fors Clavigera* seems to descend far too often for our comfort upon the skin of our own backs.

It is hard not to regret that so much of his force went into satire and attempts at reformation for which, as he knew well, he was not well-equipped by nature. It is hard too not to wish that he had lived in an age which did not isolate its great men with adulation, but encouraged them to use the best of their powers. As it is, if we want to get unalloyed good from Ruskin, we take down not *Modern Painters*, or the *Stones of Venice*, or *Sesame and Lilies*, but *Praeterita*. There he has ceased to preach or to teach or to scourge. He is writing for the last time before he enters the prolonged season of death, and his mood is still perfectly clear, more sustained than usual, and unfailingly benignant. Compared with much of his writing, it is extremely simple in style; but the simplicity is the flower of perfect skill. The words lie like a transparent veil upon his meaning. And the passage with which the book ends, though it was written when he could hardly write, is surely more beautiful than those more elaborate and gilded ones which we are apt to cut out and admire:

Fonte Branda I last saw with Charles Norton under the same arches were Dante saw it. We drank of it together, and walked together that evening in the hills above, where the fireflies among the scented thickets shone fitfully in the still undarkened air. *How* they shone! moving like fine-broken starlight through

the purple leaves. How they shone! through the sunset that faded into thunderous night as I entered Siena three days before, the white edges of the mountainous clouds still lighted from the west, and the openly golden sky calm behind the Gate of Siena's heart, with its still golden words, *Cor magis tibi Sena pandit*, and the fireflies everywhere in sky or cloud rising and falling, mixed with the lightning, and more intense than the stars.

Aurora Leigh

BY one of those ironies of fashion that might have amused the Brownings themselves, it seems likely that they are now far better known in the flesh than they have ever been in the spirit. Passionate lovers, in curls and side-whiskers, oppressed, defiant, eloping—in this guise thousands of people must know and love the Brownings who have never read a line of their poetry. They have become two of the most conspicuous figures in that bright and animated company of authors who, thanks to our modern habit of writing memoirs and printing letters and sitting to be photographed, live in the flesh, not merely as of old in the word; are known by their hats, not merely by their poems. What damage the art of photography has inflicted upon the art of literature has yet to be reckoned. How far we are going to read a poet when we can read about a poet is a problem to lay before biographers. Meanwhile, nobody can deny the power of the Brownings to excite our sympathy and rouse our interest. 'Lady Geraldine's Courtship' is glanced at perhaps by two professors in American universities once a year; but we all know how Miss Barrett lay on her sofa; how she escaped from the dark house in Wimpole Street one September morning; how she met health and happiness, freedom, and Robert Browning in the church round the corner.

But fate has not been kind to Mrs. Browning as a writer. Nobody reads her, nobody discusses her, nobody troubles to put her in her place. One has only to compare her reputation with Christina Rossetti's to trace her decline. Christina Rossetti mounts irresistibly to the first place among English women poets. Elizabeth, so much more loudly applauded during her lifetime, falls farther and farther behind. The primers dismiss her with contumely. Her importance, they say, 'has now become merely historical. Neither education nor association with her husband ever succeeded in teaching her the value of words and a sense of form.' In short, the only place in the mansion of literature that is assigned her is downstairs in the servants' quarters, where, in company with Mrs. Hemans, Eliza Cook, Jean Ingelow, Alexander Smith, Edwin

Arnold, and Robert Montgomery, she bangs the crockery about and eats vast handfuls of peas on the point of her knife.

If, therefore, we take *Aurora Leigh* from the shelf it is not so much in order to read it as to muse with kindly condescension over this token of bygone fashion, as we toy with the fringes of our grandmothers' mantles and muse over the alabaster models of the Taj Mahal which once adorned their drawing-room tables. But to the Victorians, undoubtedly, the book was very dear. Thirteen editions of *Aurora Leigh* had been demanded by the year 1873. And, to judge from the dedication, Mrs. Browning herself was not afraid to say that she set great store by it—'the most mature of my works', she calls it, 'and the one into which my highest convictions upon Life and Art have entered'. Her letters show that she had had the book in mind for many years. She was brooding over it when she first met Browning, and her intention with regard to it forms almost the first of those confidences about their work which the lovers delighted to share.

. . . my chief intention [she wrote] just now is the writing of a sort of novel-poem . . . running into the midst of our conventions, and rushing into drawing-rooms and the like, 'where angels fear to tread'; and so, meeting face to face and without mask the Humanity of the age, and speaking the truth of it out plainly. That is my intention.

But for reasons which later become clear, she hoarded her intention throughout the ten astonishing years of escape and happiness; and when at last the book appeared in 1856 she might well feel that she had poured into it the best that she had to give. Perhaps the hoarding and the saturation which resulted have something to do with the surprise that awaits us. At any rate we cannot read the first twenty pages of *Aurora Leigh* without becoming aware that the Ancient Mariner who lingers, for unknown reasons, at the porch of one book and not of another has us by the hand, and makes us listen like a three years' child while Mrs. Browning pours out in nine volumes of blank verse the story of *Aurora Leigh*. Speed and energy, forthrightness and complete self-confidence—these are the qualities that hold us enthralled. Floated off our feet by them, we learn how *Aurora* was the child of an Italian mother 'whose rare blue eyes were shut from seeing

her when she was scarcely four years old'. Her father was 'an austere Englishman, Who, after a dry lifetime spent at home in college-learning, law and parish talk, was flooded with a passion unaware', but died too, and the child was sent back to England to be brought up by an aunt. The aunt, of the well-known family of the Leighs, stood upon the hall step of her country house dressed in black to welcome her. Her somewhat narrow forehead was braided tight with brown hair pricked with gray; she had a close, mild mouth; eyes of no colour; and cheeks like roses pressed in books, 'Kept more for ruth than pleasure—if past bloom, Past fading also'. The lady had lived a quiet life, exercising her Christian gifts upon knitting stockings and stitching petticoats. 'because we are of one flesh, after all, and need one flannel'. At her hand Aurora suffered the education that was thought proper for women. She learnt a little French, a little algebra; the internal laws of the Burmese empire; what navigable river joins itself to Lara; what census of the year five was taken at Klagenfurt; also how to draw nereids neatly draped, to spin glass, to stuff birds, and model flowers in wax. For the aunt liked a woman to be womanly. *Of an evening she did cross-stitch and, owing to some mistake in her choice of silk, once embroidered a shepherdess with pink eyes. Under this torture of women's education, the passionate Aurora exclaimed, certain women have died; others pine; a few who have, as Aurora had, 'relations with the unseen', survive and walk demurely, and are civil to their cousins and listen to the vicar and pour out tea. Aurora herself was blessed with a little room. It was green-papered, had a green carpet and there were green curtains to the bed, as if to match the insipid greenery of the English countryside. There she retired; there she read. 'I had found the secret of a garret room Piled high with cases in my father's name, Piled high, packed large, where, creeping in and out . . . like some small nimble mouse between the ribs of a mastodon' she read and read. The mouse indeed (it is the way with Mrs. Browning's mice) took wings and soared, for 'It is rather when We gloriously forget ourselves and plunge Soul-forward, headlong, into a book's profound, Impassioned for its beauty and salt of truth—'Tis then we get the right good from a book'. And so she read and read, until her cousin Romney called to walk with her, or the painter Vincent Carrington, 'whom men*

judge hardly as bee-bonneted Because he holds that paint a body well you paint a soul by implication', tapped on the window.

This hasty abstract of the first volume of *Aurora Leigh* does it of course no sort of justice; but having gulped down the original much as Aurora herself advises, soul-forward, headlong, we find ourselves in a state where some attempt at the ordering of our multitudinous impressions becomes imperative. The first of these impressions and the most pervasive is the sense of the writer's presence. Through the voice of Aurora the character, the circumstances, the idiosyncrasies of Elizabeth Barrett Browning ring in our ears. Mrs. Browning could no more conceal herself than she could control herself, a sign no doubt of imperfection in an artist, but a sign also that life has impinged upon art more than life should. Again and again in the pages we have read, Aurora the fictitious seems to be throwing light upon Elizabeth the actual. The idea of the poem, we must remember, came to her in the early forties when the connexion between a woman's art and a woman's life was unnaturally close, so that it is impossible for the most austere of critics not sometimes to touch the flesh when his eyes should be fixed upon the page. And as everybody knows, the life of Elizabeth Barrett was of a nature to affect the most authentic and individual of gifts. Her mother had died when she was a child; she had read profusely and privately; her favourite brother was drowned; her health broke down; she had been immured by the tyranny of her father in almost conventual seclusion in a bedroom in Wimpole Street. But instead of rehearsing the well-known facts, it is better to read in her own words her own account of the effect they had upon her.

I have lived only inwardly [she wrote] or with *sorrow*, for a strong emotion. Before this seclusion of my illness, I was secluded still, and there are few of the youngest women in the world who have not seen more, heard more, known more, of society, than I, who am scarcely to be called young now. I grew up in the country—I had no social opportunities, had my heart in books and poetry, and my experience in reveries. And so time passed and passed—and afterwards, when my illness came . . . and no prospect (as appeared at one time) of ever passing the threshold of one room again; why then, I turned to thinking with some bitterness . . . that I had stood blind in this temple

I was about to leave—that I had seen no Human nature, that my brothers and sisters of the earth were *names* to me, that I had beheld no great mountain or river, nothing in fact. . . . And do you also know what a disadvantage this ignorance is to my art? Why, if I live on and yet do not escape from this seclusion, do you not perceive that I labour under signal disadvantages—that I am, in a manner as a *blind poet*? Certainly, there is compensation to a degree. I have had much of the inner life, and from the habit of self-consciousness and self-analysis, I make great guesses at Human nature in the main. But how willingly I would as a poet exchange some of this lumbering, ponderous, helpless knowledge of books, for some experience of life and man, for some . . .

She breaks off, with three little dots, and we may take advantage of her pause to turn once more to *Aurora Leigh*.

What damage had her life done her as a poet? A great one, we cannot deny. For it is clear, as we turn the pages of *Aurora Leigh* or of the *Letters*—one often echoes the other—that the mind which found its natural expression in this swift and chaotic poem about real men and women was not the mind to profit by solitude. A lyrical, a scholarly, a fastidious mind might have used seclusion and solitude to perfect its powers. Tennyson asked no better than to live with books in the heart of the country. But the mind of Elizabeth Barrett was lively and secular and satirical. She was no scholar. Books were to her not an end in themselves but a substitute for living. She raced through folios because she was forbidden to scamper on the grass. She wrestled with Aeschylus and Plato because it was out of the question that she should argue about politics with live men and women. Her favourite reading as an invalid was Balzac and George Sand and other 'immortal improprieties' because 'they kept the colour in my life to some degree'. Nothing is more striking when at last she broke the prison bars than the fervour with which she flung herself into the life of the moment. She loved to sit in a café and watch people passing; she loved the arguments, the politics, and the strife of the modern world. The past and its ruins, even the past of Italy and Italian ruins, interested her much less than the theories of Mr. Hume the medium, or the politics of Napoleon, Emperor of the French. Italian pictures, Greek poetry, roused in her a clumsy

and conventional enthusiasm in strange contrast with the original independence of her mind when it applied itself to actual facts.

Such being her natural bent, it is not surprising that even in the depths of her sick-room her mind turned to modern life as a subject for poetry. She waited, wisely, until her escape had given her some measure of knowledge and proportion. But it cannot be doubted that the long years of seclusion had done her irreparable damage as an artist. She had lived shut off, guessing at what was outside, and inevitably magnifying what was within. The loss of Flush, the spaniel, affected her as the loss of a child might have affected another woman. The tap of ivy on the pane became the thrash of trees in a gale. Every sound was enlarged, every incident exaggerated, for the silence of the sick-room was profound and the monotony of Wimpole Street was intense. When at last she was able to 'rush into drawing-rooms and the like and meet face to face without mask the Humanity of the age and speak the truth of it out plainly', she was too weak to stand the shock. Ordinary daylight, current gossip, the usual traffic of human beings left her exhausted, ecstatic, and dazzled into a state where she saw so much and felt so much that she did not altogether know what she felt or what she saw.

Aurora Leigh, the novel-poem, is not, therefore, the masterpiece that it might have been. Rather it is a masterpiece in embryo; a work whose genius floats diffused and fluctuating in some pre-natal stage waiting the final stroke of creative power to bring it into being. Stimulating and boring, ungainly and eloquent, monstrous and exquisite, all by turns, it overwhelms and bewilders; but, nevertheless, it still commands our interest and inspires our respect. For it becomes clear as we read that, whatever Mrs. Browning's faults, she was one of those rare writers who risk themselves adventurously and disinterestedly in an imaginative life which is independent of their private lives and demands to be considered apart from personalities. Her 'intention' survives; the interest of her theory redeems much that is faulty in her practice. Abridged and simplified from Aurora's argument in the fifth book, that theory runs something like this. The true work of poets, she said, is to present their own age, not Charlemagne's. More passion takes place in drawing-rooms than at Roncesvalles with Roland and his knights. 'To flinch from modern

varnish, coat or flounce, Cry out for togas and the picturesque, Is fatal—foolish too.' For living art presents and records real life, and the only life we can truly know is our own. But what form, she asks, can a poem on modern life take? The drama is impossible, for only servile and docile plays have any chance of success. Moreover, what we (in 1846) have to say about life is not fit for 'boards, actors, prompters, gaslight, and costume; our stage is now the soul itself'. What then can she do? The problem is difficult, performance is bound to fall short of endeavour; but she has at least wrung her life-blood on to every page of her book, and, for the rest 'Let me think of forms less, and the external. Trust the spirit . . . Keep up the fire and leave the generous flames to shape themselves.' And so the fire blazed and the flames leapt high.

The desire to deal with modern life in poetry was not confined to Miss Barrett. Robert Browning said that he had had the same ambition all his life. Coventry Patmore's 'Angel in the House' and Clough's 'Bothie' were both attempts of the same kind and preceded *Aurora Leigh* by some years. It was natural enough. The novelists were dealing triumphantly with modern life in prose. *Jane Eyre*, *Vanity Fair*, *David Copperfield*, *Richard Feverel* all trod fast on each other's heels between the years 1847 and 1860. The poets may well have felt, with Aurora Leigh, that modern life had an intensity and a meaning of its own. Why should these spoils fall solely into the laps of the prose writers? Why should the poet be forced back to the remoteness of Charlemagne and Roland, to the toga and the picturesque, when the humours and tragedies of village life, drawing-room life, club life, and street life all cried aloud for celebration? It was true that the old form in which poetry had dealt with life—the drama—was obsolete; but was there none other that could take its place? Mrs. Browning, convinced of the divinity of poetry, pondered, seized as much as she could of actual experience, and then at last threw down her challenge to the Brontës and the Thackerays in nine books of blank verse. It was in blank verse that she sang of Shoreditch and Kensington; of my aunt and the vicar; of Romney Leigh and Vincent Carrington; of Marian Erle and Lord Howe; of fashionable weddings and drab suburban streets, and bonnets and whiskers and four-wheeled cabs, and railway trains. The poets can treat of these things, she exclaimed, as well as of knights and

dames, moats and drawbridges and castle courts. But can they? Let us see what happens to a poet when he poaches upon a novelist's preserves and gives us not an epic or a lyric but the story of many lives that move and change and are inspired by the interests and passions that are ours in the middle of the reign of Queen Victoria.

In the first place there is the story; a tale has to be told; the poet must somehow convey to us the necessary information that his hero has been asked out to dinner. This is a statement that a novelist would convey as quietly and prosaically as possible; for example, 'While I was kissing her glove, sadly enough, a note was brought saying that her father sent his regards and asked me to dine with them next day'. That is harmless. But the poet has to write:

While thus I grieved, and kissed her glove,
My man brought in her note to say,
Papa had bid her send his love,
And would I dine with them next day!

Which is absurd. The simple words have been made to strut and posture and take on an emphasis which makes them ridiculous. Then again, what will the poet do with dialogue? In modern life, as Mrs. Browning indicated when she said that our stage is now the soul, the tongue has superseded the sword. It is in talk that the high moments of life, the shock of character upon character, are defined. But poetry when it tries to follow the words on people's lips is terribly impeded. Listen to Romney in a moment of high emotion talking to his old love Marian about the baby she has borne to another man:

May God so father me, as I do him,
And so forsake me, as I let him feel
He's orphaned haply. Here I take the child
To share my cup, to slumber on my knee,
To play his loudest gambol at my foot,
To hold my finger in the public ways . . .

and so on. Romney, in short, rants and reels like any of those Elizabethan heroes whom Mrs. Browning had warned so imperiously out of her modern living-room. Blank verse has proved itself the most remorseless enemy of living speech. Talk tossed up on

the surge and swing of the verse becomes high, rhetorical, impassioned; and as talk, since action is ruled out, must go on and on, the reader's mind stiffens and glazes under the monotony of the rhythm. Following the lilt of her rhythm rather than the emotions of her characters, Mrs. Browning is swept on into generalization and declamation. Forced by the nature of her medium, she ignores the slighter, the subtler, the more hidden shades of emotion by which a novelist builds up touch by touch a character in prose. Change and development, the effect of one character upon another—all this is abandoned. The poem becomes one long soliloquy, and the only character that is known to us and the only story that is told us are the character and story of Aurora Leigh herself.

Thus, if Mrs. Browning meant by a novel-poem a book in which character is closely and subtly revealed, the relations of many hearts laid bare, and a story unfalteringly unfolded, she failed completely. But if she meant rather to give us a sense of life in general, of people who are unmistakably Victorian, wrestling with the problems of their own time, all brightened, intensified, and compacted by the fire of poetry, she succeeded. Aurora Leigh, with her passionate interest in social questions, her conflict as artist and woman, her longing for knowledge and freedom, is the true daughter of her age. Romney, too, is no less certainly a mid-Victorian gentleman of high ideals who has thought deeply about the social question, and has founded, unfortunately, a phalanstery in Shropshire. The aunt, the antimacassars, and the country house from which Aurora escapes are real enough to fetch high prices in the Tottenham Court Road at this moment. The broader aspects of what it felt like to be a Victorian are seized as surely and stamped as vividly upon us as in any novel by Trollope or Mrs. Gaskell.

And indeed if we compare the prose novel and the novel-poem the triumphs are by no means all to the credit of prose. As we rush through page after page of narrative in which a dozen scenes that the novelist would smooth out separately are pressed into one, in which pages of deliberate description are fused into a single line, we cannot help feeling that the poet has outpaced the prose writer. Her page is packed twice as full as his. Characters, too, if they are not shown in conflict but snipped off and summed up with

something of the exaggeration of a caricaturist, have a heightened and symbolical significance which prose with its gradual approach cannot rival. The general aspect of things—market, sunset, church—have a brilliance and a continuity, owing to the compressions and elisions of poetry, which mock the prose writer and his slow accumulations of careful detail. For these reasons *Aurora Leigh* remains, with all its imperfections, a book that still lives and breathes and has its being. And when we think how still and cold the plays of Beddoes or of Sir Henry Taylor lie, in spite of all their beauty, and how seldom in our own day we disturb the repose of the classical dramas of Robert Bridges, we may suspect that Elizabeth Barrett was inspired by a flash of true genius when she rushed into the drawing-room and said that here, where we live and work, is the true place for the poet. At any rate, her courage was justified in her own case. Her bad taste, her tortured ingenuity, her floundering, scrambling, and confused impetuosity have space to spend themselves here without inflicting a deadly wound, while her ardour and abundance, her brilliant descriptive powers, her shrewd and caustic humour, infect us with her own enthusiasm. We laugh, we protest, we complain—it is absurd, it is impossible, we cannot tolerate this exaggeration a moment longer—but, nevertheless, we read to the end enthralled. What more can an author ask? But the best compliment that we can pay *Aurora Leigh* is that it makes us wonder why it has left no successors. Surely the street, the drawing-room, are promising subjects; modern life is worthy of the muse. But the rapid sketch that Elizabeth Barrett Browning threw off when she leapt from her couch and dashed into the drawing-room remains unfinished. The conservatism or the timidity of poets still leaves the chief spoils of modern life to the novelist. We have no novel-poem of the age of George the Fifth.

The Niece of an Earl

THERE is an aspect of fiction of so delicate a nature that less has been said about it than its importance deserves. One is supposed to pass over class distinctions in silence; one person is supposed to be as well born as another; and yet English fiction is so steeped in the ups and downs of social rank that without them it would be unrecognizable. When Meredith, in *The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper*, remarks, 'He sent word that he would wait on Lady Camper immediately, and betook himself forthwith to his toilette. She was the niece of an Earl', all of British blood accept the statement unhesitatingly, and know that Meredith is right. A General in those circumstances would certainly have given his coat an extra brush. For though the General might have been, we are given to understand that he was not, Lady Camper's social equal. He received the shock of her rank upon a naked surface. No earldom, baronetage, or knighthood protected him. He was an English gentleman merely, and a poor one at that. Therefore, to British readers even now it seems unquestionably fitting that he should 'betake himself to his toilette' before appearing in the lady's presence.

It is useless to suppose that social distinctions have vanished. Each may pretend that he knows no such restrictions, and that the compartment in which he lives allows him the run of the world. But it is an illusion. The idlest stroller down summer streets may see for himself the charwoman's shawl shouldering its way among the silk wraps of the successful; he sees shop-girls pressing their noses against the plate glass of motor-cars; he sees radiant youth and august age waiting their summons within to be admitted to the presence of King George. There is no animosity, perhaps, but there is no communication. We are enclosed, and separate, and cut off. Directly we see ourselves in the looking-glass of fiction we know that this is so. The novelist, and the English novelist in particular, knows and delights, it seems, to know that Society is a nest of glass boxes one separate from another, each housing a group with special habits and qualities of its own. He knows that there are Earls and that Earls have nieces; he knows that there are

Generals and that Generals brush their coats before they visit the nieces of Earls. But this is only the ABC of what he knows. For in a few short pages, Meredith makes us aware not only that Earls have nieces, but that Generals have cousins; that the cousins have friends; that the friends have cooks; that the cooks have husbands, and that the husbands of the cooks of the friends of the cousins of the Generals are carpenters. Each of these people lives in a glass box of his own, and has peculiarities of which the novelist must take account. What appears superficially to be the vast equality of the middle classes is, in truth, nothing of the sort. All through the social mass run curious veins and streakings separating man from man and woman from woman; mysterious prerogatives and disabilities too ethereal to be distinguished by anything so crude as a title impede and disorder the great business of human intercourse. And when we have threaded our way carefully through all these grades from the niece of the Earl to the friend of the cousin of the General, we are still faced with an abyss; a gulf yawns before us; on the other side are the working classes. The writer of perfect judgement and taste, like Jane Austen, does no more than glance across the gulf; she restricts herself to her own special class and finds infinite shades within it. But for the brisk, inquisitive, combative writer like Meredith, the temptation to explore is irresistible. He runs up and down the social scale; he chimes one note against another; he insists that the Earl and the cook, the General and the farmer shall speak up for themselves and play their part in the extremely complicated comedy of English civilized life.

It was natural that he should attempt it. A writer touched by the comic spirit relishes these distinctions keenly; they give him something to take hold of; something to make play with. English fiction without the nieces of Earls and the cousins of Generals would be an arid waste. It would resemble Russian fiction. It would have to fall back upon the immensity of the soul and upon the brotherhood of man. Like Russian fiction, it would lack comedy. But while we realize the immense debt that we owe the Earl's niece and the General's cousin, we doubt sometimes whether the pleasure we get from the play of satire on these broken edges is altogether worth the price we pay. For the price is a high one. The strain upon a novelist is tremendous. In two short

stories Meredith gallantly attempts to bridge all gulfs, and to take half a dozen different levels in his stride. Now he speaks as an Earl's niece; now as a carpenter's wife. It cannot be said that his daring is altogether successful. One has a feeling (perhaps it is unfounded) that the blood of the niece of an Earl is not quite so tart and sharp as he would have it. Aristocracy is not, perhaps, so consistently high and brusque and eccentric as, from his angle, he would represent it. Yet his great people are more successful than his humble. His cooks are too ripe and rotund; his farmers too ruddy and earthy. He overdoes the pith and the sap; the fist-shaking and the thigh-slapping. He has got too far from them to write of them with ease.

It seems, therefore, that the novelist, and the English novelist in particular, suffers from a disability which affects no other artist to the same extent. His work is influenced by his birth. He is fated to know intimately, and so to describe with understanding, only those who are of his own social rank. He cannot escape from the box in which he has been bred. A bird's-eye view of fiction shows us no gentlemen in Dickens; no working men in Thackeray. One hesitates to call *Jane Eyre* a lady. The *Elizabeths* and the *Emmas* of Miss Austen could not possibly be taken for anything else. It is vain to look for dukes or for dustmen—we doubt that such extremes are to be found anywhere in fiction. We are, therefore, brought to the melancholy and tantalizing conclusion not only that novels are poorer than they might be, but that we are very largely prevented—for after all, the novelists are the great interpreters—from knowing what is happening either in the heights of Society or in its depths. There is practically no evidence available by which we can guess at the feelings of the highest in the land. What does a King feel? What does a Duke think? We cannot say. For the highest in the land have seldom written at all, and have never written about themselves. We shall never know what the Court of Louis XIV looked like to Louis XIV himself. It seems likely indeed that the English aristocracy will pass out of existence, or be merged with the common people, without leaving any true picture of themselves behind.

But our ignorance of the aristocracy is nothing compared with our ignorance of the working classes. At all times the great families of England and France have delighted to have famous men at

their tables, and thus the Thackerays and the Disraelis and the Prousts have been familiar enough with the cut and fashion of aristocratic life to write about it with authority. Unfortunately, however, life is so framed that literary success invariably means a rise, never a fall, and seldom, what is far more desirable, a spread in the social scale. The rising novelist is never pestered to come to gin and winkles with the plumber and his wife. His books never bring him into touch with the cat's-meat man, or start a correspondence with the old lady who sells matches and bootlaces by the gate of the British Museum. He becomes rich; he becomes respectable; he buys an evening suit and dines with peers. Therefore, the later works of successful novelists show, if anything, a slight rise in the social scale. We tend to get more and more portraits of the successful and the distinguished. On the other hand, the old rat-catchers and ostlers of Shakespeare's day are shuffled altogether off the scene, or become, what is far more offensive, objects of pity, examples of curiosity. They serve to show up the rich. They serve to point the evils of the social system. They are no longer, as they used to be when Chaucer wrote, simply themselves. For it is impossible, it would seem, for working men to write in their own language about their own lives. Such education as the act of writing implies at once makes them self-conscious, or class-conscious, or removes them from their own class. That anonymity, in the shadow of which writers write most happily, is the prerogative of the middle class alone. It is from the middle class that writers spring, because it is in the middle class only that the practice of writing is as natural and habitual as hoeing a field or building a house. Thus it must have been harder for Byron to be a poet than Keats; and it is as impossible to imagine that a Duke could be a great novelist as that *Paradise Lost* could be written by a man behind a counter.

But things change; class distinctions were not always so hard and fast as they have now become. The Elizabethan age was far more elastic in this respect than our own; we, on the other hand, are far less hide-bound than the Victorians. Thus it may well be that we are on the edge of a greater change than any the world has yet known. In another century or so, none of these distinctions may hold good. The Duke and the agricultural labourer as we know them now may have died out as completely as the bustard

and the wild cat. Only natural differences such as those of brain and character will serve to distinguish us. General Ople (if there are still Generals) will visit the niece (if there are still nieces) of the Earl (if there are still Earls) without brushing his coat (if there are still coats). But what will happen to English fiction when it has come to pass that there are neither Generals, nieces, Earls, nor coats, we cannot imagine. It may change its character so that we no longer know it. It may become extinct. Novels may be written as seldom and as unsuccessfully by our descendants as the poetic drama by ourselves. The art of a truly democratic age will be—what?

The Novels of George Meredith

TWENTY years ago¹ the reputation of George Meredith was at its height. His novels had won their way to celebrity through all sorts of difficulties, and their fame was all the brighter and the more singular for what it had subdued. Then, too, it was generally discovered that the maker of these splendid books was himself a splendid old man. Visitors who went down to Box Hill reported that they were thrilled as they walked up the drive of the little suburban house by the sound of a voice booming and reverberating within. The novelist, seated among the usual knick-knacks of the drawing-room, was like the bust of Euripides to look at. Age had worn and sharpened the fine features, but the nose was still acute, the blue eyes still keen and ironical. Though he had sunk immobile into an arm-chair, his aspect was still vigorous and alert. It was true that he was almost stone-deaf, but this was the least of afflictions to one who was scarcely able to keep pace with the rapidity of his own ideas. Since he could not hear what was said to him, he could give himself wholeheartedly to the delights of soliloquy. It did not much matter, perhaps, whether his audience was cultivated or simple. Compliments that would have flattered a duchess were presented with equal ceremony to a child. To neither could he speak the simple language of daily life. But all the time this highly wrought, artificial conversation, with its crystallized phrases and its high-piled metaphors, moved and tossed on a current of laughter. His laugh curled round his sentences as if he himself enjoyed their humorous exaggeration. The master of language was splashing and diving in his element of words. So the legend grew; and the fame of George Meredith, who sat with the head of a Greek poet on his shoulders in a suburban villa beneath Box Hill, pouring out poetry and sarcasm and wisdom in a voice that could be heard almost on the high road, made his fascinating and brilliant books seem more fascinating and brilliant still.

But that is twenty years ago. His fame as a talker is necessarily

dimmed, and his fame as a writer seems also under a cloud. On none of his successors is his influence now marked. When one of them whose own work has given him the right to be heard with respect chances to speak his mind on the subject, it is not flattering.

Meredith [writes Mr Forster in his *Aspects of Fiction*] is not the great name he was twenty years ago. . . . His philosophy has not worn well. His heavy attacks on sentimentality -- they bore the present generation. . . . When he gets serious and noble-minded there is a strident overtone, a bullying that becomes distressing. . . . What with the faking, what with the preaching, which was never agreeable and is now said to be hollow, and what with the home countries posing as the universe, it is no wonder Meredith now lies in the trough.

The criticism is not, of course, intended to be a finished estimate; but in its conversational sincerity it condenses accurately enough what is in the air when Meredith is mentioned. No, the general conclusion would seem to be, Meredith has not worn well. But the value of centenaries lies in the occasion they offer us for solidifying such airy impressions. Talk, mixed with half-rubbed-out memories, forms a mist by degrees through which we scarcely see plain. To open the books again, to try to read them as if for the first time, to try to free them from the rubbish of reputation and accident -- that, perhaps, is the most acceptable present we can offer to a writer on his hundredth birthday.

And since the first novel is always apt to be an unguarded one, where the author displays his gifts without knowing how to dispose of them to the best advantage, we may do well to open *Richard Feverel* first. It needs no great sagacity to see that the writer is a novice at his task. The style is extremely uneven. Now he twists himself into iron knots; now he lies flat as a pancake. He seems to be of two minds as to his intention. Ironic comment alternates with long-winded narrative. He vacillates from one attitude to another. Indeed, the whole fabric seems to rock a little insecurely. The baronet wrapped in a cloak; the county family; the ancestral home; the uncles mouthing epigrams in the dining-room; the great ladies flaunting and swimming; the jolly farmers slapping their thighs: all liberally if spasmodically sprinkled with dried aphorisms from a pepper-pot called the

Pilgrim's Scrip—what an odd conglomeration it is! But the oddity is not on the surface; it is not merely that whiskers and bonnets have gone out of fashion: it lies deeper, in Meredith's intention, in what he wishes to bring to pass. He has been, it is plain, at great pains to destroy the conventional form of the novel. He makes no attempt to preserve the sober reality of Trollope and Jane Austen; he has destroyed all the usual staircases by which we have learnt to climb. And what is done so deliberately is done with a purpose. This defiance of the ordinary, these airs and graces, the formality of the dialogue with its Sirs and Madams are all there to create an atmosphere that is unlike that of daily life, to prepare the way for a new and an original sense of the human scene. Peacock, from whom Meredith learnt so much, is equally arbitrary, but the virtue of the assumptions he asks us to make is proved by the fact that we accept Mr. Skionar and the rest with natural delight. Meredith's characters in *Richard Feverel*, on the other hand, are at odds with their surroundings. We at once exclaim how unreal they are, how artificial, how impossible. The baronet and the butler, the hero and the heroine, the good woman and the bad woman are mere types of baronets and butlers, good women and bad. For what reason, then, has he sacrificed the substantial advantages of realistic common sense—the staircase and the stucco? Because, it becomes clear as we read, he possessed a keen sense not of the complexity of character, but of the splendour of a scene. One after another in this first book he creates a scene to which we can attach abstract names—Youth, The Birth of Love, The Power of Nature. We are galloped to them over every obstacle on the pounding hoofs of rhapsodical prose.

Away with Systems! Away with a corrupt World! Let us breathe the air of the Enchanted Island! Golden lie the meadows; golden run the streams; red gold is on the pine stems.

We forget that Richard is Richard and that Lucy is Lucy; they are youth; the world runs molten gold. The writer is a rhapsodist, a poet then; but we have not yet exhausted all the elements in this first novel. We have to reckon with the author himself. He has a mind stuffed with ideas, hungry for argument. His boys and girls may spend their time picking daisies in the meadows, but they

breathe, however unconsciously, an air bristling with intellectual question and comment. On a dozen occasions these incongruous elements strain and threaten to break apart. The book is cracked through and through with those fissures which come when the author seems to be of twenty minds at the same time. Yet it succeeds in holding miraculously together, not certainly by the depths and originality of its character drawing but by the vigour of its intellectual power and by its lyrical intensity.

We are left, then, with our curiosity aroused. Let him write another book or two; get into his stride; control his crudities: and we will open *Harry Richmond* and see what has happened now. Of all the things that might have happened this surely is the strangest. All trace of immaturity is gone; but with it every trace of the uneasy adventurous mind has gone too. The story bowls smoothly along the road which Dickens has already trodden of autobiographical narrative. It is a boy speaking, a boy thinking, a boy adventuring. For that reason, no doubt, the author has curbed his redundancy and pruned his speech. The style is the most rapid possible. It runs smooth, without a kink in it. Stevenson, one feels, must have learnt much from this supple narrative, with its precise adroit phrases, its exact quick glance at visible things.

Plunged among dark green leaves, smelling wood-smoke, at night; at morning waking up, and the world alight, and you standing high, and marking the hills where you will see the next morning and the next, morning after morning, and one morning the dearest person in the world surprising you just before you wake: I thought this a heavenly pleasure.

It goes gallantly, but a little self-consciously. He hears himself talking. Doubts begin to rise and hover and settle at last (as in *Richard Feverel*) upon the human figures. These boys are no more real boys than the sample apple which is laid on top of the basket is a real apple. They are too simple, too gallant, too adventurous to be of the same unequal breed as David Copperfield, for example. They are sample boys, novelist's specimens; and again we encounter the extreme conventionality of Meredith's mind where we found it, to our surprise, before. With all his boldness (and there is no risk that he will not run with probability) there

are a dozen occasions on which a reach-me-down character will satisfy him well enough. But just as we are thinking that the young gentlemen are altogether too pat, and the adventures which befall them altogether too slick, the shallow bath of illusion closes over our heads and we sink with Richmond Roy and the Princess Ottilia into the world of fantasy and romance, where all holds together and we are able to put our imagination at the writer's service without reserve. That such surrender is above all things delightful: that it adds spring-heels to our boots: that it fires the cold scepticism out of us and makes the world glow in lucid transparency before our eyes, needs no showing, as it certainly submits to no analysis. That Meredith can induce such moments proves him possessed of an extraordinary power. Yet it is a capricious power and highly intermittent. For pages all is effort and agony; phrase after phrase is struck and no light comes. Then, just as we are about to drop the book, the rocket roars into the air; the whole scene flashes into light; and the book, years after, is recalled by that sudden splendour.

If, then, this intermittent brilliancy is Meredith's characteristic excellence, it is worth while to look into it more closely. And perhaps the first thing that we shall discover is that the scenes which catch the eye and remain in memory are static; they are illuminations, not discoveries; they do not improve our knowledge of the characters. It is significant that Richard and Lucy, Harry and Ottilia, Clara and Vernon, Beauchamp and Renée are presented in carefully appropriate surroundings—on board a yacht, under a flowering cherry tree, upon some river-bank, so that the landscape always makes part of the emotion. The sea or the sky or the wood is brought forward to symbolize what the human beings are feeling or looking.

The sky was bronze, a vast furnace dome. The folds of light and shadow everywhere were satin rich. That afternoon the bee hummed of thunder and refreshed the ear.

That is a description of a state of mind.

These winter mornings are divine. They move on noiselessly. The earth is still as if waiting. A wren warbles, and flits through the lank, drenched branches; hillside opens green; everywhere is mist, everywhere expectancy.

That is a description of a woman's face. But only some states of mind and some expressions of face can be described in imagery—only those which are so highly wrought as to be simple and, for that reason, will not submit to analysis. This is a limitation; for though we may be able to see these people, very brilliantly, in a moment of illumination, they do not change or grow; the light sinks and leaves us in darkness. We have no such intuitive knowledge of Meredith's characters as we have of Stendhal's, Tchekov's, Jane Austen's. Indeed, our knowledge of such characters is so intimate that we can almost dispense with 'great scenes' altogether. Some of the most emotional scenes in fiction are the quietest. We have been wrought upon by nine hundred and ninety-nine little touches; the thousandth, when it comes, is as slight as the others, but the effect is prodigious. But with Meredith there are no touches; there are hammer-strokes only, so that our knowledge of his characters is partial, spasmodic, and intermittent.

Meredith, then, is not among the great psychologists who feel their way, anonymously and patiently, in and out of the fibres of the mind and make one character differ minutely and completely from another. He is among the poets who identify the character with the passion or with the idea; who symbolize and make abstract. And yet—here lay his difficulty perhaps—he was not a poet-novelist wholly and completely as Emily Brontë was a poet-novelist. He did not steep the world in one mood. His mind was too self-conscious, and too sophisticated to remain lyrical for long. He does not sing only; he dissects. Even in his most lyrical scenes a sneer curls its lash round the phrases and laughs at their extravagance. And as we read on, we shall find that the comic spirit, when it is allowed to dominate the scene, licked the world to a very different shape. *The Egoist* at once modifies our theory that Meredith is pre-eminently the master of great scenes. Here there is none of that precipitate hurry that has rushed us over obstacles to the summit of one emotional peak after another. The case is one that needs argument; argument needs logic; Sir Willoughby, 'our original male in giant form', is turned slowly round before a steady fire of scrutiny and criticism which allows no twitch on the victim's part to escape it. That the victim is a wax model and not entirely living flesh and blood is perhaps true.

At the same time Meredith pays us a supreme compliment to which as novel-readers we are little accustomed. We are civilized people, he seems to say, watching the comedy of human relations together. Human relations are of profound interest. Men and women are not cats and monkeys, but beings of a larger growth and of a greater range. He imagines us capable of disinterested curiosity in the behaviour of our kind. This is so rare a compliment from a novelist to his reader that we are at first bewildered and then delighted. Indeed his comic spirit is a far more penetrating goddess than his lyrical. It is she who cuts a clear path through the brambles of his manner; she who surprises us again and again by the depth of her observations; she who creates the dignity, the seriousness, and the vitality of Meredith's world. Had Meredith, one is tempted to reflect, lived in an age or in a country where comedy was the rule, he might never have contracted those airs of intellectual superiority, that manner of oracular solemnity which it is, as he points out, the use of the comic spirit to correct.

But in many ways the age—if we can judge so amorphous a shape—was hostile to Meredith, or, to speak more accurately, was hostile to his success with the age we now live in—the year 1928. His teaching seems now too strident and too optimistic and too shallow. It obtrudes; and when philosophy is not consumed in a novel, when we can underline this phrase with a pencil, and cut out that exhortation with a pair of scissors and paste the whole into a system, it is safe to say that there is something wrong with the philosophy or with the novel or with both. Above all, his teaching is too insistent. He cannot, even to hear the profoundest secret, suppress his own opinion. And there is nothing that characters in fiction resent more. If, they seem to argue, we have been called into existence merely to express Mr. Meredith's views upon the universe, we would rather not exist at all. Thereupon they die; and a novel that is full of dead characters, even though it is also full of profound wisdom and exalted teaching, is not achieving its aim as a novel. But here we reach another point upon which the present age may be inclined to have more sympathy with Meredith. When he wrote, in the seventies and eighties of the last century, the novel had reached a stage where it could only exist by moving onward. It is a possible contention

that after those two perfect novels, *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Small House at Allington*, English fiction had to escape from the dominion of that perfection, as English poetry had to escape from the perfection of Tennyson. George Eliot, Meredith, and Hardy were all imperfect novelists largely because they insisted upon introducing qualities, of thought and of poetry, that are perhaps incompatible with fiction at its most perfect. On the other hand, if fiction had remained what it was to Jane Austen and Trollope, fiction would by this time be dead. Thus Meredith deserves our gratitude and excites our interest as a great innovator. Many of our doubts about him and much of our inability to frame any definite opinion of his work comes from the fact that it is experimental and thus contains elements that do not fuse harmoniously—the qualities are at odds: the one quality which binds and concentrates has been omitted. To read Meredith, then, to our greatest advantage we must make certain allowances and relax certain standards. We must not expect the perfect quietude of a traditional style nor the triumphs of a patient and pedestrian psychology. On the other hand, his claim, 'My method has been to prepare my readers for a crucial exhibition of the personae, and then to give the scene in the fullest of their blood and brain under stress of a fierce situation', is frequently justified. Scene after scene rises on the mind's eye with a flare of fiery intensity. If we are irritated by the dancing-master dandyism which made him write 'gave his lungs full play' instead of laughed, or 'tasted the swift intricacies of the needle' instead of sewed, we must remember that such phrases prepare the way for the 'fierce situations'. Meredith is creating the atmosphere from which we shall pass naturally into a highly pitched state of emotion. Where the realistic novelist, like Trollope, lapses into flatness and dullness, the lyrical novelist, like Meredith, becomes meretricious and false; and such falsity is, of course, not only much more glaring than flatness, but it is a greater crime against the phlegmatic nature of prose fiction. Perhaps Meredith had been well advised if he had abjured the novel altogether and kept himself wholly to poetry. Yet we have to remind ourselves that the fault may be ours. Our prolonged diet upon Russian fiction, rendered neutral and negative in translation, our absorption in the convolutions of psychological Frenchmen, may have led us to forget that the

English language is naturally exuberant, and the English character full of humours and eccentricities. Meredith's flamboyancy has a great ancestry behind it; we cannot avoid all memory of Shakespeare.

When such questions and qualifications crowd upon us as we read, the fact may be taken to prove that we are neither near enough to be under his spell nor far enough to see him in proportion. Thus the attempt to pronounce a finished estimate is even more illusive than usual. But we can testify even now that to read Meredith is to be conscious of a packed and muscular mind; of a voice booming and reverberating with its own unmistakable accent even though the partition between us is too thick for us to hear what he says distinctly. Still, as we read we feel that we are in the presence of a Greek god though he is surrounded by the innumerable ornaments of a suburban drawing-room; who talks brilliantly, even if he is deaf to the lower tones of the human voice; who, if he is rigid and immobile, is yet marvellously alive and on the alert. This brilliant and uneasy figure has his place with the great eccentrics rather than with the great masters. He will be read, one may guess, by fits and starts; he will be forgotten and discovered and again discovered and forgotten like Donne, and Peacock, and Gerard Hopkins. But if English fiction continues to be read, the novels of Meredith must inevitably rise from time to time into view; his work must inevitably be disputed and discussed.

On Re-reading Meredith¹

THIS new study² of Meredith is not a text-book to be held in one hand while in the other you hold *The Shaving of Shagpat* or *Modern Love*; it is addressed to those who have so far solved the difficulties of the Master that they wish to make up their minds as to his final position in English literature. The book should do much to crystallize opinion upon Meredith, if only because it will induce many people to read him again. For Mr. Crees has written in a spirit of enthusiasm which makes it easy to do so. He summons Diana and Willoughby Patterne and Richard Feverel from the shelves where they have fallen a little silent lately and in a moment the air is full of high-pitched, resonant voices, speaking the unmistakable language of metaphor, epigram, and fantastic poetic dialogue. Some readers, to judge from our own ease, will feel a momentary qualm, as at meeting after the lapse of years some hero so ardently admired once that his eccentricities and foibles are now scarcely tolerable; they seem to preserve too well the faults of our own youth. Further, in the presence of so faithful an admirer as Mr. Crees we may be reminded of some intervening disloyalties. It was not Thackeray or Dickens or George Eliot who seriously tempted us from our allegiance; but can we say the same of the great Russians? Oddly enough, when Mr. Crees is taking Meredith's measure by comparing him with his contemporaries he makes no mention of Turgenev, Tolstoy, or Dostoevsky. But it was *Fathers and Sons*, *War and Peace*, *Crime and Punishment* that seduced multitudes of the faithful and, worse still, seemed for the time to reduce Meredith to an insular hero bred and cherished for the delight of connoisseurs in some sheltered corner of a Victorian hothouse.

The Russians might well overcome us, for they seemed to possess an entirely new conception of the novel and one that was larger, saner, and much more profound than ours. It was one that allowed human life in all its width and depth, with every shade of feeling and subtlety of thought, to flow into their pages without

¹ *Times Literary Supplement*, July 25, 1918

² *George Meredith: A Study of his Works and Personality*, by J. H. E. Crees

the distortion of personal eccentricity or mannerism. Life was too serious to be juggled with. It was too important to be manipulated. Could any English novel survive in the furnace of that overpowering sincerity? For some time the verdict seemed to go tacitly against Meredith. His fine phrases, his perpetual imagery, the superabundant individuality which so much resembled an overweening egotism seemed to be the very stuff to perish in that uncompromising flame. Perhaps some of us went as far as to believe that the process had already been accomplished and that it was useless to open books in which you would find nothing but charred bones and masses of contorted wire. The poems, *Modern Love*, *Love in the Valley*, and some of the shorter pieces survived the ordeal more successfully and did perhaps keep alive that latent enthusiasm upon which Mr. Crees now blows with the highest praise that it is possible to bestow upon literature. He does not scruple to compare Meredith with Shakespeare. Shakespeare alone, he says, could have written the 'Diversion Played upon a Penny Whistle' in *Richard Feverel*. Meredith 'illustrates better than any since Shakespeare that impetuous mental energy which Matthew Arnold deemed the source of our literary greatness'. One might even infer from some statements that Meredith was the undisputed equal of the greatest of poets. 'No man has ever been endowed with richer gifts.' He was the possessor of 'in some ways the most consummate intellect that has ever been devoted to literature'. These, moreover, are not the irresponsible flings of a momentary enthusiasm but the considered opinion of a man who writes with ability and critical insight and has reached his superlatives by intelligible degrees of appreciation. We should perhaps alter his scale by putting Donne in the place of Shakespeare; but however we may regulate our superlatives he creates the right mood for reading Meredith again.

The right mood for reading Meredith should have a large proportion of enthusiasm in it, for Meredith aims at, and when he is successful has his dwelling in, the very heart of the emotions. There, indeed, we have one of the chief differences between him and the Russians. They accumulate; they accept ugliness; they seek to understand; they penetrate further and further into the human soul with their terrible power of sustained insight and their undeviating reverence for truth. But Meredith takes truth

by storm; he takes it with a phrase, and his best phrases are not mere phrases but are compact of many different observations, fused into one and flashed out in a line of brilliant light. It is by such phrases that we get to know his characters. They come to mind at once in thinking of them. Sir Willoughby 'has a leg'. Clara Middleton 'carries youth like a flag'. Vernon Whitford is 'Phoebus Apollo turned fasting Friar'; everyone who has read the novels holds a store of such phrases in his memory. But the same process is applied not only to single characters but to large and complicated situations where a number of different states of mind are represented. Here, too, he wishes to crush the truth out in a series of metaphors or a string of epigrams with as little resort to dull fact as may be. Then, indeed, the effort is prodigious, and the confusion often chaotic. But the failure arises from the enormous scope of his ambition. Let us suppose that he has to describe a tea party; he will begin by destroying everything by which it is easy to recognize a tea party—chairs, tables, cups, and the rest; he will represent the scene merely by a ring on a finger and a plume passing the window. But into the ring and plume he puts such passion and character and such penetrating rays of vision play about the denuded room that we seem to be in possession of all the details as if a painstaking realist had described each one of them separately. To have produced this effect as often as Meredith has done so is an enormous feat. That is the way, as one trusts at such moments, that the art of fiction will develop. For such beauty and such high emotional excitement it is well worth while to exchange the solidity which is the result of knowing the day of the week, how the ladies are dressed, and by what series of credible events the great crisis was accomplished. But the doubt will suggest itself whether we are not sacrificing something of greater importance than mere solidity. We have gained moments of astonishing intensity; we have gained a high level of sustained beauty; but perhaps the beauty is lacking in some quality that makes it a satisfying beauty? 'My love', Meredith wrote, 'is for epical subjects—not for cobwebs in a putrid corner, though I know the fascination of unravelling them.' He avoids ugliness as he avoids dullness. 'Sheer realism', he wrote, 'is at best the breeder of the dungfly.' Sheer romance breeds an insect more diaphanous, but it tends perhaps to be even more

heartless than the dungfly. A touch of realism—or is it a touch of something more akin to sympathy?—would have kept the Meredith hero from being the honourable but tedious gentleman that, with deference to Mr. Crees, we have always found him. It would have charged the high mountain air of his books with the greater variety of clouds.

But, for good or for ill, Meredith has the habit of nobleness ingrained in him. No modern writer, for example, has so completely ignored the colloquial turns of speech and cast his dialogue in sentences that could without impropriety have been spoken by Queen Elizabeth in person. 'Out of my sight, I say!' 'I went to him of my own will to run from your heartlessness, mother—that I call mother!' are two examples found upon turning two pages of *The Tragic Comedians*. That is his natural pitch, although we may guess that the long indifference of the public increased his tendency to the strained and the artificial. For this, among other reasons, it is easy to complain that his world is an aristocratic world, strictly bounded, thinly populated, a little hard-hearted, and not to be entered by the poor, the vulgar, the stupid, or that very common and interesting individual who is a mixture of all three.

And yet there can be no doubt that, even judged by his novels alone, Meredith remains a great writer. The doubt is rather whether he can be called a great novelist; whether, indeed, anyone to whom the technique of novel writing had so much that was repulsive in it can excel compared with those who are writing, not against the grain, but with it. He struggles to escape, and the chapters of amazing but fruitless energy which he produces in his struggle to escape are the true obstacles to the enjoyment of Meredith. What, we ask, is he struggling against? What is he striving for? Was he, perhaps, a dramatist born out of due time—an Elizabethan sometimes, and sometimes, as the last chapters of *The Egoist* suggest, a dramatist of the Restoration? Like a dramatist, he flouts probability, disdains coherency, and lives from one high moment to the next. His dialogue often seems to crave the relief of blank verse. And for all his analytic industry in the dissection of character, he creates not the living men and women who justify modern fiction, but superb conceptions who have more of the general than of the particular in them. There is a

large and beautiful conception of womanhood in Diana rather than a single woman; there is the fervour of romantic love in Richard Feverel, but the faces of the lovers are dim in the rosy light. In this lies both the strength and the weakness of his books, but, if the weakness is at all of the kind we have indicated, the strength is of a nature to counterbalance it. His English power of imagination, with its immense audacity and fertility, his superb mastery of the great emotions of courage and love, his power of summoning nature into sympathy with man and of merging him in her vastness, his glory in all fine living and thinking—these are the qualities that give his conceptions their size and universality. In these respects we must recognize his true descent from the greatest of English writers and his enjoyment of qualities that are expressed nowhere save in the masterpieces of our literature.

The Russian Point of View

DOUBTFUL as we frequently are whether either in French or the Americans, who have so much in common with us, can yet understand English literature, we must admit graver doubts whether, for all their enthusiasm, the English can understand Russian literature. Debate might protract itself indefinitely as to what we mean by 'understand'. Instances will occur to everybody of American writers in particular who have written with the highest discrimination of our literature and of ourselves; who have lived a lifetime among us, and finally have taken legal steps to become subjects of King George. For all that, have they understood us, have they not remained to the end of their days foreigners? Could anyone believe that the novels of Henry James were written by a man who had grown up in the society which he describes, or that his criticism of English writers was written by a man who had read Shakespeare without any sense of the Atlantic Ocean and two or three hundred years on the far side of it separating his civilization from ours? A special acuteness and detachment, a sharp angle of vision the foreigner will often achieve; but not that absence of self-consciousness, that ease and fellowship and sense of common values which make for intimacy, and sanity, and the quick give and take of familiar intercourse.

Not only have we all this to separate us from Russian literature, but a much more serious barrier—the difference of language. Of all those who feasted upon Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Tchekov during the past twenty years, not more than one or two perhaps have been able to read them in Russian. Our estimate of their qualities has been formed by critics who have never read a word of Russian, or seen Russia, or even heard the language spoken by natives; who have had to depend, blindly and implicitly, upon the work of translators.

What we are saying amounts to this, then, that we have judged a whole literature stripped of its style. When you have changed every word in a sentence from Russian to English, have thereby altered the sense a little, the sound, weight, and accent of the words in relation to each other completely, nothing remains

except a crude and coarsened version of the sense. Thus treated, the great Russian writers are like men deprived by an earthquake or a railway accident not only of all their clothes, but also of something subtler and more important—their manners, the idiosyncrasies of their characters. What remains is, as the English have proved by the fanaticism of their admiration, something very powerful and very impressive, but it is difficult to feel sure, in view of these mutilations, how far we can trust ourselves not to impute, to distort, to read into them an emphasis which is false.

They have lost their clothes, we say, in some terrible catastrophe, for some such figure as that describes the simplicity, the humanity, startled out of all effort to hide and disguise its instincts, which Russian literature, whether it is due to translation or to some more profound cause, makes upon us. We find these qualities steeping it through, as obvious in the lesser writers as in the greater. 'Learn to make yourselves akin to people. I would even like to add: make yourself indispensable to them. But let this sympathy be not with the mind—for it is easy with the mind—but with the heart, with love towards them.' 'From the Russian', one would say instantly, wherever one chanced on that quotation. The simplicity, the absence of effort, the assumption that in a world bursting with misery the chief call upon us is to understand our fellow-sufferers, 'and not with the mind—for it is easy with the mind—but with the heart'—this is the cloud which broods above the whole of Russian literature, which lures us from our own parched brilliancy and scorched thoroughfares to expand in its shade—and of course with disastrous results. We become awkward and self-conscious; denying our own qualities, we write with an affectation of goodness and simplicity which is nauseating in the extreme. We cannot say 'Brother' with simple conviction. There is a story by Mr. Galsworthy in which one of the characters so addresses another (they are both in the depths of misfortune). Immediately everything becomes strained and affected. The English equivalent for 'Brother' is 'Mate'—a very different word, with something sardonic in it, an indefinable suggestion of humour. Met though they are in the depths of misfortune the two Englishmen who thus accost each other will, we are sure, find a job, make their fortunes, spend the last years of their lives in luxury, and leave a sum of money to prevent poor devils from

calling each other 'Brother' on the Embankment. But it is common suffering, rather than common happiness, effort, or desire that produces the sense of brotherhood. It is the 'deep sadness' which Dr. Hagberg Wright finds typical of the Russian people that creates their literature.

A generalization of this kind will, of course, even if it has some degree of truth when applied to the body of literature, be changed profoundly when a writer of genius sets to work on it. At once other questions arise. It is seen that an 'attitude' is not simple; it is highly complex. Men reft of their coats and their manners, stunned by a railway accident, say hard things, harsh things, unpleasant things, difficult things, even if they say them with the abandonment and simplicity which catastrophe has bred in them. Our first impressions of Tchekov are not of simplicity but of bewilderment. What is the point of it, and why does he make a story out of this? we ask as we read story after story. A man falls in love with a married woman, and they part and meet, and in the end are left talking about their position and by what means they can be free from 'this intolerable bondage'.

'How? How?' he asked, clutching his head. . . . And it seemed as though in a little while the solution would be found and then a new and splendid life would begin.' That is the end. A postman drives a student to the station and all the way the student tries to make the postman talk, but he remains silent. Suddenly the postman says unexpectedly, 'It's against the regulations to take any one with the post'. And he walks up and down the platform with a look of anger on his face 'With whom was he angry? Was it with people, with poverty, with the autumn nights?' Again, that story ends.

But is it the end, we ask? We have rather the feeling that we have overrun our signals; or it is as if a tune had stopped short without the expected chords to close it. These stories are inconclusive, we say, and proceed to frame a criticism based upon the assumption that stories ought to conclude in a way that we recognize. In so doing, we raise the question of our own fitness as readers. Where the tune is familiar and the end emphatic—lovers united, villains discomfited, intrigues exposed—as it is in most Victorian fiction, we can scarcely go wrong, but where the tune is unfamiliar and the end a note of interrogation or merely the in-

formation that they went on talking, as it is in Tchekov, we need a very daring and alert sense of literature to make us hear the tune, and in particular those last notes which complete the harmony. Probably we have to read a great many stories before we feel, and the feeling is essential to our satisfaction, that we hold the parts together, and that Tchekov was not merely rambling disconnectedly, but struck now this note, now that with intention, in order to complete his meaning.

We have to cast about in order to discover where the emphasis in these strange stories rightly comes. Tchekov's own words give us a lead in the right direction. '... such a conversation as this between us', he says, 'would have been unthinkable for our parents. At night they did not talk, but slept sound; we, our generation, sleep badly, are restless, but talk a great deal, and are always trying to settle whether we are right or not.' Our literature of social satire and psychological finesse both sprang from that restless sleep, that incessant talking; but after all, there is an enormous difference between Tchekov and Henry James, between Tchekov and Bernard Shaw. Obviously—but where does it arise? Tchekov, too, is aware of the evils and injustices of the social state; the condition of the peasants appals him, but the reformer's zeal is not his—that is not the signal for us to stop. The mind interests him enormously; he is a most subtle and delicate analyst of human relations. But again, no; the end is not there. Is it that he is primarily interested not in the soul's relation with other souls, but with the soul's relation to health—with the soul's relation to goodness? These stories are always showing us some affectation, pose, insincerity. Some woman has got into a false relation; some man has been perverted by the inhumanity of his circumstances. The soul is ill; the soul is cured; the soul is not cured. Those are the emphatic points in his stories.

Once the eye is used to these shades, half the 'conclusions' of fiction fade into thin air; they show like transparencies with a light behind them—gaudy, glaring, superficial. The general tidying up of the last chapter, the marriage, the death, the statement of values so sonorously trumpeted forth, so heavily underlined, become of the most rudimentary kind. Nothing is solved, we feel; nothing is rightly held together. On the other hand, the method which at first seemed so casual, inconclusive, and occupied with

trifles, now appears the result of an exquisitely original and fastidious taste, choosing boldly, arranging infallibly, and controlled by an honesty for which we can find no match save among the Russians themselves. There may be no answer to these questions, but at the same time let us never manipulate the evidence so as to produce something fitting, decorous, agreeable to our vanity. This may not be the way to catch the ear of the public; after all, they are used to louder music, fiercer measures; but as the tune sounded so he has written it. In consequence, as we read these little stories about nothing at all, the horizon widens; the soul gains an astonishing sense of freedom.

In reading Tchekov we find ourselves repeating the word 'soul' again and again. It sprinkles his pages. Old drunkards use it freely; '. . . you are high up in the service, beyond all reach, but haven't real soul, my dear boy . . . there's no strength in it'. Indeed, it is the soul that is the chief character in Russian fiction. Delicate and subtle in Tchekov, subject to an infinite number of humours and distempers, it is of greater depth and volume in Dostoevsky; it is liable to violent diseases and raging fevers, but still the predominant concern. Perhaps that is why it needs so great an effort on the part of an English reader to read *The Brothers Karamazov* or *The Possessed* a second time. The 'soul' is alien to him. It is even antipathetic. It has little sense of humour and no sense of comedy. It is formless. It has slight connection with the intellect. It is confused, diffuse, tumultuous, incapable, it seems, of submitting to the control of logic or the discipline of poetry. The novels of Dostoevsky are seething whirlpools, gyrating sandstorms, waterspouts which hiss and boil and suck us in. They are composed purely and wholly of the stuff of the soul. Against our wills we are drawn in, whirled round, blinded, suffocated, and at the same time filled with a giddy rapture. Out of Shakespeare there is no more exciting reading. We open the door and find ourselves in a room full of Russian generals, the tutors of Russian generals, their stepdaughters and cousins, and crowds of miscellaneous people who are all talking at the tops of their voices about their most private affairs. But where are we? Surely it is the part of a novelist to inform us whether we are in an hotel, a flat, or hired lodging. Nobody thinks of explaining. We are souls, tortured, unhappy souls, whose only business it is

to talk, to reveal, to confess, to draw up at whatever rending of flesh and nerve those crabbed sins which crawl on the sand at the bottom of us. But, as we listen, our confusion slowly settles. A rope is flung to us; we catch hold of a soliloquy; holding on by the skin of our teeth, we are rushed through the water; feverishly, wildly, we rush on and on, now submerged, now in a moment of vision understanding more that we have ever understood before, and receiving such revelations as we are wont to get only from the press of life at its fullest. As we fly we pick it all up—the names of the people, their relationships, that they are staying in an hotel at Roulettenburg, that Polina is involved in an intrigue with the Marquis de Grioux—but what unimportant matters these are compared with the soul! It is the soul that matters, its passion, its tumult, its astonishing medley of beauty and vileness. And if our voices suddenly rise into shrieks of laughter, or if we are shaken by the most violent sobbing, what more natural?—it hardly calls for remark. The pace at which we are living is so tremendous that sparks must rush off our wheels as we fly. Moreover, when the speed is thus increased and the elements of the soul are seen, not separately in scenes of humour or scenes of passion as our slower English minds conceive them, but streaked, involved, inextricably confused, a new panorama of the human mind is revealed. The old divisions melt into each other. Men are at the same time villains and saints; their acts are at once beautiful and despicable. We love and we hate at the same time. There is none of that precise division between good and bad to which we are used. Often those for whom we feel most affection are the greatest criminals, and the most abject sinners move us to the strongest admiration as well as love.

Dashed to the crest of the waves, bumped and battered on the stones at the bottom, it is difficult for an English reader to feel at ease. The process to which he is accustomed in his own literature is reversed. If we wished to tell the story of a General's love affair (and we should find it very difficult in the first place not to laugh at a General), we should begin with his house; we should solidify his surroundings. Only when all was ready should we attempt to deal with the General himself. Moreover, it is not the samovar but the teapot that rules in England; time is limited; space crowded; the influence of other points of view, of other

books, even of other ages, makes itself felt. Society is sorted out into lower, middle, and upper classes, each with its own traditions, its own manners, and, to some extent, its own language. Whether he wishes it or not, there is a constant pressure upon an English novelist to recognize these barriers, and, in consequence, order is imposed on him and some kind of form; he is inclined to satire rather than to compassion, to scrutiny of society rather than understanding of individuals themselves.

No such restraints were laid on Dostoevsky. It is all the same to him whether you are noble or simple, a tramp or a great lady. Whoever you are, you are the vessel of this perplexed liquid, this cloudy, yeasty, precious stuff, the soul. The soul is not restrained by barriers. It overflows, it floods, it mingles with the souls of others. The simple story of a bank clerk who could not pay for a bottle of wine spreads, before we know what is happening, into the lives of his father-in-law and the five mistresses whom his father-in-law treated abominably, and the postman's life, and the charwoman's, and the Princesses' who lodged in the same block of flats; for nothing is outside Dostoevsky's province; and when he is tired, he does not stop, he goes on. He cannot restrain himself. Out it tumbles upon us, hot, scalding, mixed, marvellous, terrible, oppressive—the human soul.

There remains the greatest of all novelists—for what else can we call the author of *War and Peace*? Shall we find Tolstoy, too, alien, difficult, a foreigner? Is there some oddity in his angle of vision which, at any rate until we have become disciples and so lost our bearings, keeps us at arm's length in suspicion and bewilderment? From his first words we can be sure of one thing at any rate—here is a man who sees what we see, who proceeds, too, as we are accustomed to proceed, not from the inside outwards, but from the outside inwards. Here is a world in which the postman's knock is heard at eight o'clock, and people go to bed between ten and eleven. Here is a man, too, who is no savage, no child of nature; he is educated; he has had every sort of experience. He is one of those born aristocrats who have used their privileges to the full. He is metropolitan, not suburban. His senses, his intellect, are acute, powerful, and well nourished. There is something proud and superb in the attack of such a mind and such a body upon life. Nothing seems to escape him. Nothing

glances off him unrecorded. Nobody, therefore, can so convey the excitement of sport, the beauty of horses, and all the fierce desirability of the world to the senses of a strong young man. Every twig, every feather sticks to his magnet. He notices the blue or red of a child's frock; the way a horse shifts its tail; the sound of a cough; the action of a man trying to put his hands into pockets that have been sewn up. And what his infallible eye reports of a cough or a trick of the hands his infallible brain refers to something hidden in the character, so that we know his people, not only by the way they love and their views on politics and the immortality of the soul, but also by the way they sneeze and choke. Even in a translation we feel that we have been set on a mountain-top and had a telescope put into our hands. Everything is astonishingly clear and absolutely sharp. Then, suddenly, just as we are exulting, breathing deep, feeling at once braced and purified, some detail—perhaps the head of a man—comes at us out of the picture in an alarming way, as if extruded by the very intensity of its life. 'Suddenly a strange thing happened to me: first I ceased to see what was around me; then his face seemed to vanish till only the eyes were left, shining over against mine; next the eyes seemed to be in my own head, and then all became confused—I could see nothing and was forced to shut my eyes, in order to break loose from the feeling of pleasure and fear which his gaze was producing in me. . . .' Again and again we share Masha's feelings in *Family Happiness*. One shuts one's eyes to escape the feeling of pleasure and fear. Often it is pleasure that is uppermost. In this very story there are two descriptions, one of a girl walking in a garden at night with her lover, one of a newly married couple prancing down their drawing-room, which so convey the feeling of intense happiness that we shut the book to feel it better. But always there is an element of fear which makes us, like Masha, wish to escape from the gaze which Tolstoy fixes on us. Is it the sense, which in real life might harass us, that such happiness as he describes is too intense to last, that we are on the edge of disaster? Or is it not that the very intensity of our pleasure is somehow questionable and forces us to ask, with Pozdnyshev in the *Kreutzer Sonata*, 'But why live?' Life dominates Tolstoy as the soul dominates Dostoevsky. There is always at the centre of all the brilliant and flashing petals of the flower this scorpion,

'Why live?' There is always at the centre of the book some Olenin, or Pierre, or Levin who gathers into himself all experience, turns the world round between his fingers, and never ceases to ask, even as he enjoys it, what is the meaning of it, and what should be our aims. It is not the priest who shatters our desires most effectively; it is the man who has known them, and loved them himself. When he derides them, the world indeed turns to dust and ashes beneath our feet. Thus fear mingles with our pleasure, and of the three great Russian writers, it is Tolstoy who most entralls us and most repels.

But the mind takes its bias from the place of its birth, and no doubt, when it strikes upon a literature so alien as the Russian, flies off at a tangent far from the truth.

The Novels of Turgenev¹

RATHER more than fifty years ago Turgenev died in France and was buried in Russia, appropriately it may seem, if we remember how much he owed to France and yet how profoundly he belonged to his own land. The influence of both countries is to be felt if we look at his photograph for a moment before reading his books. The magnificent figure in the frock coat of Parisian civilization seems to be gazing over the houses far away at some wider view. He has the air of a wild beast who is captive but remembers whence he came. 'C'est un colosse charmant, un doux géant aux cheveux blancs, qui a l'air du bienveillant génie d'une montagne ou d'une forêt' the brothers Goncourt wrote when they met him at dinner in 1863. 'Il est beau, grandement beau, énormément beau, avec du bleu du ciel dans les yeux, avec le charme du chantonement de l'accent russe, de cette cantilène où il y a un rien de l'enfant et du nègre.' And Henry James noted later the great physical splendour, the Slav languor and 'the air of neglected strength, as if it had been part of his modesty never to remind himself that he was strong. He used sometimes to blush like a boy of sixteen'. Perhaps something of the same combination of qualities is to be found if we turn to his books.

At first, after years of absence it may be, they seem to us a little thin, slight and sketchlike in texture. Take *Rudin*, for instance—the reader will place it among the French school, among the copies rather than the originals, with the feeling that the writer has set himself an admirable model, but in following it has sacrificed something of his own character and force. But the superficial impression deepens and sharpens itself as the pages are turned. The scene has a size out of all proportion to its length. It expands in the mind and lies there giving off fresh ideas, emotions, and pictures much as a moment in real life will sometimes only yield its meaning long after it has passed. We notice that though the people talk in the most natural speaking voices, what they say is always unexpected; the meaning goes on after the sound

has stopped. Moreover, they do not have to speak in order to make us feel their presence; 'Volintsev started and raised his head, as though he had just waked up'—we had felt him there though he had not spoken. And when in some pause we look out of the window, the emotion is returned to us, deepened, because it is given through another medium, by the trees or the clouds, by the barking of a dog, or the song of a nightingale. Thus we are surrounded on all sides—by the talk, by the silence, by the look of things. The scene is extraordinarily complete.

It is easy to say that in order to gain a simplicity so complex Turgenev has gone through a long struggle of elimination beforehand. He knows all about his people, so that when he writes he chooses only what is most salient without apparent effort. But when we have finished *Rudin*, *Fathers and Children*, *Smoke*, *On the Eve* and the others, many questions suggest themselves to which it is not so easy to find an answer. They are so short and yet they hold so much. The emotion is so intense and yet so calm. The form is in one sense so perfect, in another so broken. They are about Russia in the fifties and sixties of the last century, and yet they are about ourselves at the present moment. Can we then find out from Turgenev himself what principles guided him—had he, for all his seeming ease and lightness, some drastic theory of art? A novelist, of course, lives so much deeper down than a critic that his statements are apt to be contradictory and confusing; they seem to break in process of coming to the surface, and do not hold together in the light of reason. Still, Turgenev was much interested in the art of fiction, and one or two of his sayings may help us to clarify our impressions of the famous novels. Once, for example, a young writer brought him the manuscript of a novel to criticize. Turgenev objected that he had made his heroine say the wrong thing. 'What then ought she to have said?' the author asked. Turgenev exploded. 'Trouver l'expression propre, c'est votre affaire!' But, the youth objected, he could not find it. 'Eh bien! vous devez la trouver. . . . Ne pensez pas que je sais l'expression et que je ne veux pas vous la dire. Trouver, en la cherchant, une expression *propre* est impossible: elle doit couler de source. Quelquefois même, il faut créer l'expression ou le mot.' And he advised him to put away his manuscript for a month or so, when the expression might come to him. If not—'Si vous n'y

arrivez pas, cela voudra dire que vous ne ferez jamais rien qui vaille.' From this it would seem that Turgenev is among those who hold that the right expression, which is of the utmost importance, is not to be had by observation, but comes from the depths unconsciously. You cannot find by looking. But then again he speaks of the novelist's art, and now he lays the greatest emphasis upon the need of observation. The novelist must observe everything exactly, in himself and in others. 'La douleur passera et la page excellente reste.' He must observe perpetually, impersonally, impartially. And still he is only at the beginning. '. . . il faut encore lire, toujours étudier, approfondir tout ce qui entoure, non seulement tâcher de saisir la vie dans toutes les manifestations, mais encore la comprendre, comprendre les lois d'après lesquelles elle se meut et qui ne se montrent pas toujours . . .' That, was how he himself worked before he grew old and lazy, he said. But one has need of strong muscles to do it, he added; nor if we consider what he is asking can we accuse him of exaggeration.

For he is asking the novelist not only to do many things but some that seem incompatible. He has to observe facts impartially, yet he must also interpret them. Many novelists do the one; many do the other—we have the photograph and the poem. But few combine the fact and the vision; and the rare quality that we find in Turgenev is the result of this double process. For in these short chapters he is doing two very different things at the same time. With his infallible eye he observes everything accurately. Solomin picks up a pair of gloves; they were 'white chamois-leather gloves, recently washed, every finger of which had stretched at the tip and looked like a finger-biscuit'. But he stops when he has shown us the glove exactly; the interpreter is at his elbow to insist that even a glove must be relevant to the character, or to the idea. But the idea alone is not enough; the interpreter is never allowed to mount unchecked into the realms of imagination; again the observer pulls him back and reminds him of the other truth, the truth of fact. Even Bazarov, the heroic, packed his best trousers at the top of his bag when he wanted to impress a lady. The two partners work in closest alliance. We look at the same thing from different angles, and that is one reason why the short chapters hold so much; they contain so many contrasts. On one and the same page we have irony and passion; the poetic and the

commonplace; a tap drips and a nightingale sings. And yet, though the scene is made up of contrasts, it remains the same scene; our impressions are all relevant to each other.

Such a balance, of course, between two very different faculties is extremely rare, especially in English fiction, and demands some sacrifices. The great characters, with whom we are so familiar in our literature, the Micawbers, the Pecksniffs, the Becky Sharps, will not flourish under such supervision; they need, it seems, more licence; they must be allowed to dominate and perhaps to destroy other competitors. With the possible exception of Bazarov and of Harlov in *A Lear of the Steppes* no one character in Turgenev's novels stands out above and beyond the rest so that we remember him apart from the book. The Rudins, the Lavretskys, the Litvinovs, the Elenas, the Lisas, the Mariannas shade off into each other, making, with all their variations, one subtle and profound type rather than several distinct and highly individualized men and women. Then, again, the poet-novelists like Emily Brontë, Hardy, or Melville, to whom facts are symbols, certainly give us a more overwhelming and passionate experience in *Wuthering Heights* or *The Return of the Native* or *Moby Dick* than any that Turgenev offers us. And yet what Turgenev offers us not only affects us as poetry, but his books are perhaps more completely satisfying than the others. They are curiously of our own time, undecayed, and complete in themselves.

For the other quality that Turgenev possesses in so great a degree is the rare gift of symmetry, of balance. He gives us, in comparison with other novelists, a generalized and harmonized picture of life. And this is not only because his scope is wide—he shows us different societies, the peasant's, the intellectual's, the aristocrat's, the merchant's—but we are conscious of some further control and order. Yet such symmetry, as we are reminded, perhaps, by reading *A House of Gentlefolk*, is not the result of a supreme gift for storytelling. Turgenev, on the contrary, often tells a story very badly. There are loops and circumlocutions in his narrative—'. . . we must ask the reader's permission to break off the thread of our story for a time', he will say. And then for fifty pages or so we are involved in great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers, much to our confusion, until we are back with Lavretsky at O—'where we parted from him, and whither we

will now ask the indulgent reader to return with us'. The good storyteller, who sees his book as a succession of events, would never have suffered that interruption. But Turgenev did not see his books as a succession of events; he saw them as a succession of emotions radiating from some character at the centre. A Bazarov, a Harlov seen in the flesh, perhaps, once in the corner of a railway carriage, becomes of paramount importance and acts as a magnet which has the power to draw things mysteriously belonging, though apparently incongruous, together. The connexion is not of events but of emotions, and if at the end of the book we feel a sense of completeness, it must be that in spite of his defects as a storyteller Turgenev's ear for emotion was so fine that even if he uses an abrupt contrast, or passes away from his people to a description of the sky or of the forest, all is held together by the truth of his insight. He never distracts us with the real incongruity—the introduction of an emotion that is false, or a transition that is arbitrary.

It is for this reason that his novels are not merely symmetrical but make us feel so intensely. His heroes and heroines are among the few fictitious characters of whose love we are convinced. It is a passion of extraordinary purity and intensity. The love of Elena for Insarov, her anguish when he fails to come, her despair when she seeks refuge in the chapel in the rain; the death of Bazarov and the sorrow of his old father and mother remain in the mind like actual experiences. And yet, strangely enough, the individual never dominates; many other things seem to be going on at the same time. We hear the hum of life in the fields; a horse champs his bit; a butterfly circles and settles. And as we notice, without seeming to notice, life going on, we feel more intensely for the men and women themselves because they are not the whole of life, but only part of the whole. Something of this, of course, is due to the fact that Turgenev's people are profoundly conscious of their relation to things outside themselves. 'What is my youth for, what am I living for, why have I a soul, what is it all for?' Elena asks in her diary. The question is always on her lips.

It lends a profundity to talk that is otherwise light, amusing, full of exact observation. Turgenev is never, as in England he might have been, merely the brilliant historian of manners. But

not only do they question the aim of their own lives but they brood over the question of Russia. The intellectuals are always working for Russia; they sit up arguing about the future of Russia till the dawn rises over the eternal samovar. 'They worry and worry away at that unlucky subject, as children chew away at a bit of india-rubber,' Potugin remarks in *Smoke*. Turgenev, exiled in body, cannot absent himself from Russia—he has the almost morbid sensibility that comes from a feeling of inferiority and suppression. And yet he never allows himself to become a partisan, a mouthpiece. Irony never deserts him; there is always the other side, the contrast. In the midst of political ardour we are shown Fomushka and Fimushka, 'chubby, spruce little things, a perfect pair of little poll-parrots,' who manage to exist very happily singing glees in spite of their country. Also it is a difficult business, he reminds us, to know the peasants, not merely to study them. 'I could not *simplify* myself', wrote Nezhdanov, the intellectual, before he killed himself. Moreover though Turgenev could have said with Marianna '... I suffer for all the oppressed, the poor, the wretched in Russia,' it was for the good of the cause, just as it was for the good of his art, not to expatiate, not to explain. 'Non, quand tu as énoncé le fait, n'insiste pas. Que le lecteur le discute et le comprenne lui-même. Croyez-moi, c'est mieux dans l'intérêt même des idées qui vous sont chères.' He compelled himself to stand outside; he laughed at the intellectuals; he showed up the windiness of their arguments, the sublime folly of their attempts. But his emotion, and their failure, affect us all the more powerfully now because of that aloofness. Yet if this method was partly the result of discipline and theory, no theory, as Turgenev's novels abundantly prove, is able to go to the root of the matter and eliminate the artist himself; his temperament remains ineradicable. Nobody, we say over and over again as we read him, even in a translation, could have written this except Turgenev. His birth, his race, the impressions of his childhood, pervade everything that he wrote.

But, though temperament is fated and inevitable, the writer has a choice, and a very important one, in the use he makes of it. 'I' he must be; but there are many different 'I's' in the same person. Shall he be the 'I' who has suffered this slight, that injury, who desires to impose his own personality, to win popularity and

power for himself and his views; or shall he suppress that 'I' in favour of the one who sees as far as he can impartially and honestly, without wishing to plead a cause or to justify himself? Turgenev had no doubt about his choice; he refused to write 'élégamment et chaudement ce que vous ressentez à l'aspect de cette chose ou de cet homme'. He used the other self, the self which has been so rid of superfluities that it is almost impersonal in its intense individuality; the self which he defines in speaking of the actress Violetta:

She had thrown aside everything subsidiary, everything superfluous, and *found herself*; a rare, a lofty delight for an artist! She had suddenly crossed the limit, which it is impossible to define, beyond which is the abiding place of beauty.

That is why his novels are still so much of our own time; no hot and personal emotion has made them local and transitory; the man who speaks is not a prophet clothed with thunder but a seer who tries to understand. Of course there are weaknesses; one grows old and lazy as he said; sometimes his books are slight, confused, and perhaps sentimental. But they dwell in 'the abiding place of beauty' because he chose to write with the most fundamental part of his being as a writer; nor, for all his irony and aloofness, do we ever doubt the depth of his feeling.

Lewis Carroll¹

THE complete works of Lewis Carroll have been issued by the Nonesuch Press in a stout volume of 1293 pages. So there is no excuse—Lewis Carroll ought once and for all to be complete. We ought to be able to grasp him whole and entire. But we fail—once more we fail. We think we have caught Lewis Carroll; we look again and see an Oxford clergyman. We think we have caught the Rev. C. L. Dodgson—we look again and see a fairy elf. The book breaks in two in our hands. In order to cement it, we turn to the Life.

But the Rev. C. L. Dodgson had no life. He passed through the world so lightly that he left no print. He melted so passively into Oxford that he is invisible. He accepted every convention; he was prudish, pernickety, pious, and jocose. If Oxford dons in the nineteenth century had an essence he was that essence. He was so good that his sisters worshipped him; so pure that his nephew has nothing to say about him. It is just possible, he hints, that 'a shadow of disappointment lay over Lewis Carroll's life'. Mr. Dodgson at once denies the shadow. 'My life', he says, 'is free from all trial and trouble.' But this untinted jelly contained within it a perfectly hard crystal. It contained childhood. And this is very strange, for childhood normally fades slowly. Wisps of childhood persist when the boy or girl is a grown man or woman. Childhood returns sometimes by day, more often by night. But it was not so with Lewis Carroll. For some reason, we know not what, his childhood was sharply severed. It lodged in him whole and entire. He could not disperse it. And therefore as he grew older this impediment in the centre of his being, this hard block of pure childhood, starved the mature man of nourishment. He slipped through the grown-up world like a shadow, solidifying only on the beach at Eastbourne, with little girls whose frocks he pinned up with safety pins. But since childhood remained in him entire, he could do what no one else has ever been able to do—he could return to that world; he could re-create it, so that we too become children again.

In order to make us into children, he first makes us asleep. 'Down, down, down, would the fall *never* come to an end?' Down, down, down we fall into that terrifying, wildly inconsequent, yet perfectly logical world where time races, then stands still; where space stretches, then contracts. It is the world of sleep; it is also the world of dreams. Without any conscious effort dreams come; the white rabbit, the walrus, and the carpenter, one after another, turning and changing one into the other, they come skipping and leaping across the mind. It is for this reason that the two Alices are not books for children; they are the only books in which we become children. President Wilson, Queen Victoria, *The Times* leader writer, the late Lord Salisbury—it does not matter how old, how important, or how insignificant you are, you become a child again. To become a child is to be very literal; to find everything so strange that nothing is surprising; to be heartless, to be ruthless, yet to be so passionate that a snub or a shadow drapes the world in gloom. It is so to be Alice in Wonderland.

It is also to be Alice Through the Looking Glass. It is to see the world upside down. Many great satirists and moralists have shown us the world upside down, and have made us see it, as grown-up people see it, savagely. Only Lewis Carroll has shown us the world upside down as a child sees it, and has made us laugh as children laugh, irresponsibly. Down the groves of pure nonsense we whirl laughing, laughing—

*They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care;
They pursued it with forks and hope . . .*

And then we wake. None of the transitions in *Alice in Wonderland* is quite so queer. For we wake to find—is it the Rev. C. L. Dodgson? Is it Lewis Carroll? Or is it both combined? This conglomerate object intends to produce an extra-Bowdlerized edition of Shakespeare for the use of British maidens; implores them to think of death when they go to the play; and always, always to realize that 'the true object of life is the development of character. . . .' Is there, then, even in 1293 pages, any such thing as 'completeness'?

The Novels of Thomas Hardy¹

WHEN we say that the death of Thomas Hardy leaves English fiction without a leader, we mean that there is no other writer whose supremacy would be generally accepted, none to whom it seems so fitting and natural to pay homage. Nobody of course claimed it less. The unworldly and simple old man would have been painfully embarrassed by the rhetoric that flourishes on such occasions as this. Yet it is no less than the truth to say that while he lived there was one novelist at all events who made the art of fiction seem an honourable calling; while Hardy lived there was no excuse for thinking meanly of the art he practised. Nor was this solely the result of his peculiar genius. Something of it sprang from his character in its modesty and integrity, from his life, lived simply down in Dorsetshire without self-seeking or self-advertisement. For both reasons, because of his genius and because of the dignity with which his gift was used, it was impossible not to honour him as an artist and to feel respect and affection for the man. But it is of the work that we must speak, of the novels that were written so long ago that they seem as detached from the fiction of the moment as Hardy himself was remote from the stir of the present and its littleness.

We have to go back more than a generation if we are to trace the career of Hardy as a novelist. In the year 1871 he was a man of thirty-one; he had written a novel, *Desperate Remedies*, but he was by no means an assured craftsman. He 'was feeling his way to a method', he said himself; as if he were conscious that he possessed all sorts of gifts, yet did not know their nature, or how to use them to advantage. To read that first novel is to share in the perplexity of its author. The imagination of the writer is powerful and sardonic; he is book-learned in a home-made way; he can create characters but he cannot control them; he is obviously hampered by the difficulties of his technique and, what is more singular, he is driven by some sense that human beings are the sport of forces outside themselves, to make use of an extreme and even melodramatic use of coincidence. He is already possessed of

¹Written in January, 1928

the conviction that a novel is not a toy, nor an argument; it is a means of giving truthful if harsh and violent impressions of the lives of men and women. But perhaps the most remarkable quality in the book is the sound of a waterfall that echoes and booms through its pages. It is the first manifestation of the power that was to assume such vast proportions in the later books. He already proves himself a minute and skilled observer of Nature; the rain, he knows, falls differently as it falls upon roots or arable; he knows that the wind sounds differently as it passes through the branches of different trees. But he is aware in a larger sense of Nature as a force; he feels in it a spirit that can sympathize or mock or remain the indifferent spectator of human fortunes. Already that sense was his; and the crude story of Miss Aldclyffe and Cytherea is memorable because it is watched by the eyes of the gods, and worked out in the presence of Nature.

That he was a poet should have been obvious; that he was a novelist might still have been held uncertain. But the year after, when *Under the Greenwood Tree* appeared, it was clear that much of the effort of 'feeling for a method' had been overcome. Something of the stubborn originality of the earlier book was lost. The second is accomplished, charming, idyllic compared with the first. The writer, it seems, may well develop into one of our English landscape painters, whose pictures are all of cottage gardens and old peasant women, who lingers to collect and preserve from oblivion the old-fashioned ways and words which are rapidly falling into disuse. And yet what kindly lover of antiquity, what naturalist with a microscope in his pocket, what scholar solicitous for the changing shapes of language, ever heard the cry of a small bird killed in the next wood by an owl with such intensity? The cry 'passed into the silence without mingling with it'. Again we hear, very far away, like the sound of a gun out at sea on a calm summer's morning, a strange and ominous echo. But as we read these early books there is a sense of waste. There is a feeling that Hardy's genius was obstinate and perverse; first one gift would have its way with him and then another. They would not consent to run together easily in harness. Such indeed was likely to be the fate of a writer who was at once poet and realist, a faithful son of field and down, yet tormented by the doubts and despondencies bred of book-learning; a lover of old ways and plain countrymen, yet

doomed to see the faith and flesh of his forefathers turn to thin and spectral transparencies before his eyes.

To this contradiction Nature had added another element likely to disorder a symmetrical development. Some writers are born conscious of everything; others are unconscious of many things. Some, like Henry James and Flaubert, are able not merely to make the best use of the spoil their gifts bring in, but control their genius in the act of creation; they are aware of all the possibilities of every situation, and are never taken by surprise. The unconscious writers, on the other hand, like Dickens and Scott, seem suddenly and without their own consent to be lifted up and swept onwards. The wave sinks and they cannot say what has happened or why. Among them—it is the source of his strength and of his weakness—we must place Hardy. His own word, ‘moments of vision’, exactly describes those passages of astonishing beauty and force which are to be found in every book that he wrote. With a sudden quickening of power which we cannot foretell, nor he, it seems, control, a single scene breaks off from the rest. We see, as if it existed alone and for all time, the wagon with Fanny’s dead body inside travelling along the road under the dripping trees; we see the bloated sheep struggling among the clover; we see Troy flashing his sword round Bathsheba where she stands motionless, cutting the lock off her head and spitting the caterpillar on her breast. Vivid to the eye, but not to the eye alone, for every sense participates, such scenes dawn upon us and their splendour remains. But the power goes as it comes. The moment of vision is succeeded by long stretches of plain daylight, nor can we believe that any craft or skill could have caught the wild power and turned it to a better use. The novels therefore are full of inequalities; they are lumpish and dull and inexpressive; but they are never arid; there is always about them a little blur of unconsciousness, that halo of freshness and margin of the unexpressed which often produce the most profound sense of satisfaction. It is as if Hardy himself were not quite aware of what he did, as if his consciousness held more than he could produce, and he left it for his readers to make out his full meaning and to supplement it from their own experience.

For these reasons Hardy’s genius was uncertain in development, uneven in accomplishment, but, when the moment came, mag-

nificent in achievement. The moment came, completely and fully, in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. (The subject was right; the method was right; the poet and the countryman, the sensual man, the sombre reflective man, the man of learning, all enlisted to produce a book which, however fashions may chop and change, must hold its place among the great English novels. There is, in the first place, that sense of the physical world which Hardy more than any novelist can bring before us; the sense that the little prospect of man's existence is ringed by a landscape which, while it exists apart, yet confers a deep and solemn beauty upon his drama. The dark downland, marked by the barrows of the dead and the huts of shepherds, rises against the sky, smooth as a wave of the sea, but solid and eternal; rolling away to the infinite distance, but sheltering in its folds quiet villages whose smoke rises in frail columns by day, whose lamps burn in the immense darkness by night. Gabriel Oak tending his sheep up there on the back of the world is the eternal shepherd; the stars are ancient beacons; and for ages he has watched beside his sheep)

But down in the valley the earth is full of warmth and life; the farms are busy, the barns stored, the fields loud with the lowing of cattle and the bleating of sheep. Nature is prolific, splendid, and lustful; not yet malignant and still the Great Mother of labouring men. And now for the first time Hardy gives full play to his humour, where it is freest and most rich, upon the lips of country men. Jan Coggan and Henry Fray and Joseph Poorgrass gather in the malthouse when the day's work is over and give vent to that half-shrewd, half-poetic humour which has been brewing in their brains and finding expression over their beer since the pilgrims tramped the Pilgrims' Way; which Shakespeare and Scott and George Eliot all loved to overhear, but none loved better or heard with greater understanding than Hardy. But it is not the part of the peasants in the Wessex novels to stand out as individuals. They compose a pool of common wisdom, of common humour, a fund of perpetual life. They comment upon the actions of the hero and heroine, but while Troy or Oak or Fanny or Bathsheba come in and out and pass away, Jan Coggan and Henry Fray and Joseph Poorgrass remain. They drink by night and they plough the fields by day. They are eternal. We meet them over and over again in the novels, and they always have something typical about

them, more of the character that marks a race than of the features which belong to an individual. The peasants are the great sanctuary of sanity, the country the last stronghold of happiness. When they disappear, there is no hope for the race.

With Oak and Troy and Bathsheba and Fanny Robin we come to the men and women of the novels at their full stature. In every book three or four figures predominate, and stand up like lightning conductors to attract the force of the elements. Oak and Troy and Bathsheba; Eustacia, Wildeve, and Venn; Henchard, Lucetta, and Farfrae; Jude, Sue Bridehead, and Phillotson. There is even a certain likeness between the different groups. They live as individuals and they differ as individuals; but they also live as types and have a likeness as types. Bathsheba is Bathsheba, but she is woman and sister to Eustacia and Lucetta and Sue; Gabriel is Gabriel Oak, but he is man and brother to Henchard, Venn, and Jude. However lovable and charming Bathsheba may be, still she is weak; however stubborn and ill-guided Henchard may be, still he is strong. This is a fundamental part of Hardy's vision; the staple of many of his books. The woman is the weaker and the fleshlier, and she clings to the stronger and obscures his vision. How freely, nevertheless, in his greater books life is poured over the unalterable framework! When Bathsheba sits in the wagon among her plants, smiling at her own loveliness in the little looking-glass, we may know, and it is proof of Hardy's power that we do know, how severely she will suffer and cause others to suffer before the end. But the moment has all the bloom and beauty of life. And so it is, time and time again. His characters, both men and women, were creatures to him of an infinite attraction. For the women he shows a more tender solicitude than for the men, and in them, perhaps, he takes a keener interest. Vain might their beauty be and terrible their fate, but while the glow of life is in them their step is free, their laughter sweet, and theirs is the power to sink into the breast of Nature and become part of her silence and solemnity, or to rise and put on them the movement of the clouds and the wildness of the flowering woodlands. The men who suffer, not like the women through dependence upon other human beings, but through conflict with fate, enlist our sterner sympathies. For such a man as Gabriel Oak we need have no passing fears. Honour him we must, though it is not granted us to

love him quite so freely. He is firmly set upon his feet and can give as shrewd a blow, to men at least, as any he is likely to receive. He has a prevision of what is to be expected that springs from character rather than from education. He is stable in his temperament, steadfast in his affections, and capable of open-eyed endurance without flinching. But he, too, is no puppet. He is a homely, humdrum fellow on ordinary occasions. He can walk the street without making people turn to stare at him. In short, nobody can deny Hardy's power—the true novelist's power—to make us believe that his characters are fellow-beings driven by their own passions and idiosyncrasies, while they have—and this is the poet's gift—something symbolical about them which is common to us all.

And it is when we are considering Hardy's power of creating men and women that we become most conscious of the profound differences that distinguish him from his peers. We look back at a number of these characters and ask ourselves what it is that we remember them for. We recall their passions. We remember how deeply they have loved each other and often with what tragic results. We remember the faithful love of Oak for Bathsheba; the tumultuous but fleeting passions of men like Wildeve, Troy, and Fitzpiers; we remember the filial love of Clym for his mother, the jealous paternal passion of Henchard for Elizabeth Jane. But we do not remember how they have loved. We do not remember how they talked and changed and got to know each other, finely, gradually, from step to step and from stage to stage. Their relationship is not composed of those intellectual apprehensions and subtleties of perception which seem so slight yet are so profound. In all the books love is one of the great facts that mould human life. But it is a catastrophe; it happens suddenly and overwhelmingly, and there is little to be said about it. The talk between the lovers when it is not passionate is practical or philosophic, as though the discharge of their daily duties left them with more desire to question life and its purpose than to investigate each other's sensibilities. Even if it were in their power to analyse their emotions, life is too stirring to give them time. They need all their strength to deal with the downright blows, the freakish ingenuity, the gradually increasing malignity of fate. They have none to spend upon the subtleties and delicacies of the human comedy.

Thus there comes a time when we can say with certainty that we shall not find in Hardy some of the qualities that have given us most delight in the works of other novelists. He has not the perfection of Jane Austen, or the wit of Meredith, or the range of Thackeray, or Tolstoy's amazing intellectual power. There is in the work of the great classical writers a finality of effect which places certain of their scenes, apart from the story, beyond the reach of change. We do not ask what bearing they have upon the narrative, nor do we make use of them to interpret problems which lie on the outskirts of the scene. A laugh, a blush, half a dozen words of dialogue, and it is enough; the source of our delight is perennial. But Hardy has none of this concentration and completeness. His light does not fall directly upon the human heart. It passes over it and out on to the darkness of the heath and upon the trees swaying in the storm. When we look back into the room the group by the fireside is dispersed. Each man or woman is battling with the storm, alone, revealing himself most when he is least under the observation of other human beings. We do not know them as we know *Pierre* or *Natasha* or *Becky Sharp*. We do not know them in and out and all round as they are revealed to the casual caller, to the Government official, to the great lady, to the general on the battlefield. We do not know the complication and involvement and turmoil of their thoughts. Geographically, too, they remain fixed to the same stretch of the English countryside. It is seldom, and always with unhappy results, that Hardy leaves the yeoman or farmer to describe the class above theirs in the social scale. In the drawing-room and clubroom and ballroom, where people of leisure and education come together, where comedy is bred and shades of character revealed, he is awkward and ill at ease. But the opposite is equally true. If we do not know his men and women in their relations to each other, we know them in their relations to time, death, and fate. If we do not see them in quick agitation against the lights and crowds of cities, we see them against the earth, the storm, and the seasons. We know their attitude towards some of the most tremendous problems that can confront mankind. They take on a more than mortal size in memory. We see them, not in detail but enlarged and dignified. We see *Tess* reading the baptismal service in her nightgown 'with an impress of dignity that was almost regal'. We see *Marty South*, 'like a

being who had rejected with indifference the attribute of sex for the loftier quality of abstract humanism', laying the flowers on Winterbourne's grave. Their speech has a Biblical dignity and poetry. They have a force in them which cannot be defined, a force of love or of hate, a force which in the men is the cause of rebellion against life, and in the women implies an illimitable capacity for suffering, and it is this which dominates the character and makes it unnecessary that we should see the finer features that lie hid. This is the tragic power; and, if we are to place Hardy among his fellows, we must call him the greatest tragic writer among English novelists.

But let us, as we approach the danger-zone of Hardy's philosophy, be on our guard. Nothing is more necessary, in reading an imaginative writer, than to keep at the right distance above his page. Nothing is easier, especially with a writer of marked idiosyncrasy, than to fasten on opinions, convict him of a creed, tether him to a consistent point of view. Nor was Hardy any exception to the rule that the mind which is most capable of receiving impressions is very often the least capable of drawing conclusions. It is for the reader, steeped in the impression, to supply the comment. It is his part to know when to put aside the writer's conscious intention in favour of some deeper intention of which perhaps he may be unconscious. Hardy himself was aware of this. A novel 'is an impression, not an argument', he has warned us, and, again

Unadjusted impressions have their value, and the road to a true philosophy of life seems to lie in humbly recording diverse readings of its phenomena as they are forced upon us by chance and change.

Certainly it is true to say of him that, at his greatest, he gives us impressions; at his weakest, arguments. In *The Woodlanders*, *The Return of the Native*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and above all, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, we have Hardy's impression of life as it came to him without conscious ordering. Let him once begin to tamper with his direct intuitions and his power is gone. 'Did you say the stars were worlds, Tess?' asks little Abraham as they drive to market with their beehives. Tess replies that they are like

'the apples on our stubborn-tree, most of them splendid and sound—a few blighted'. 'Which do we live on—a splendid or a blighted one?' 'A blighted one,' she replies, or rather the mournful thinker who has assumed her mask speaks for her. The words protrude, cold and raw, like the springs of a machine where we had seen only flesh and blood. We are crudely jolted out of that mood of sympathy which is renewed a moment later when the little cart is run down and we have a concrete instance of the ironical methods which rule our planet.

That is the reason why *Jude the Obscure* is the most painful of all Hardy's books, and the only one against which we can fairly bring the charge of pessimism. In *Jude the Obscure* argument is allowed to dominate impression, with the result that though the misery of the book is overwhelming it is not tragic. As calamity succeeds calamity we feel that the case against society is not being argued fairly or with profound understanding of the facts. Here is nothing of that width and force and knowledge of mankind which, when Tolstoy criticizes society, makes his indictment formidable. Here we have revealed to us the petty cruelty of men, not the large injustice of the gods. It is only necessary to compare *Jude the Obscure* with *The Mayor of Casterbridge* to see where Hardy's true power lay. Jude carries on his miserable contest against the deans of colleges and the conventions of sophisticated society. Henchard is pitted, not against another man, but against something outside himself which is opposed to men of his ambition and power. No human being wishes him ill. Even Farfrae and Newson and Elizabeth Jane whom he has wronged all come to pity him, and even to admire his strength of character. He is standing up to fate, and in backing the old Mayor whose ruin has been largely his own fault, Hardy makes us feel that we are backing human nature in an unequal contest. There is no pessimism here. Throughout the book we are aware of the sublimity of the issue, and yet it is presented to us in the most concrete form. From the opening scene in which Henchard sells his wife to the sailor at the fair to his death on Egdon Heath the vigour of the story is superb, its humour rich and racy, its movement large-limbed and free. The skimmity ride, the fight between Farfrae and Henchard in the loft, Mrs. Cuxsom's speech upon the death of Mrs. Henchard, the talk of the ruffians at Peter's Finger with

Nature present in the background or mysteriously dominating the foreground, are among the glories of English fiction. Brief and scanty, it may be, is the measure of happiness allowed to each, but so long as the struggle is, as Henchard's was, with the decrees of fate and not with the laws of man, so long as it is in the open air and calls for activity of the body rather than of the brain, there is greatness in the contest, there is pride and pleasure in it, and the death of the broken corn merchant in his cottage on Egdon Heath is comparable to the death of Ajax, lord of Salamis. The true tragic emotion is ours.

Before such power as this we are made to feel that the ordinary tests which we apply to fiction are futile enough. Do we insist that a great novelist shall be a master of melodious prose? Hardy was no such thing. He feels his way by dint of sagacity and uncompromising sincerity to the phrase he wants, and it is often of unforgettable pungency. Failing it, he will make do with any homely or clumsy or old-fashioned turn of speech, now of the utmost angularity, now of a bookish elaboration. No style in literature, save Scott's, is so difficult to analyse; it is on the face of it so bad, yet it achieves its aim so unmistakably. As well might one attempt to rationalize the charm of a muddy country road, or of a plain field of roots in winter. And then, like Dorsetshire itself, out of these very elements of stiffness and angularity his prose will put on greatness; will roll with a Latin sonority; will shape itself in a massive and monumental symmetry like that of his own bare downs. Then again, do we require that a novelist shall observe the probabilities, and keep close to reality? To find anything approaching the violence and convolution of Hardy's plots one must go back to the Elizabethan drama. Yet we accept his story completely as we read it; more than that, it becomes obvious that his violence and his melodrama, when they are not due to a curious peasant-like love of the monstrous for its own sake, are part of that wild spirit of poetry which saw with intense irony and grimness that no reading of life can possibly outdo the strangeness of life itself, no symbol of caprice and unreason be too extreme to represent the astonishing circumstances of our existence.

But as we consider the great structure of the Wessex Novels it seems irrelevant to fasten on little points—this character, that

scene, this phrase of deep and poetic beauty. It is something larger that Hardy has bequeathed to us. The Wessex Novels are not one book, but many. They cover an immense stretch; inevitably they are full of imperfections—some are failures, and others exhibit only the wrong side of their maker's genius. But undoubtedly, when we have submitted ourselves fully to them, when we come to take stock of our impression of the whole, the effect is commanding and satisfactory. We have been freed from the cramp and pettiness imposed by life. Our imaginations have been stretched and heightened; our humour has been made to laugh out; we have drunk deep of the beauty of the earth. Also we have been made to enter the shade of a sorrowful and brooding spirit which, even in its saddest mood, bore itself with a grave uprightness and never, even when most moved to anger, lost its deep compassion for the sufferings of men and women. Thus it is no mere transcript of life at a certain time and place that Hardy has given us. It is a vision of the world and of man's lot as they revealed themselves to a powerful imagination, a profound and poetic genius, a gentle and humane soul.

Henry James

*I. Within the Rim*¹

IT would be easy to justify the suspicion which the sight of *Within the Rim* aroused, and to make it account for the tepid and formal respect with which we own to have approached the book. Essays about the war contributed to albums and books with a charitable object even by the most distinguished of writers bear for the most part such traces of perfunctory composition, such evidence of genius forcibly harnessed to the wagon of philanthropy and sullen and stubborn beneath the lash, that one is inclined for the sake of the writer to leave them unread. But we should not have said this unless we intended immediately and completely to unsay it. The process of reading these essays was a process of recantation. It is possible that the composition of some of them was an act of duty, in the sense that the writing of a chapter of a novel was not an act of duty. But the duty was imposed upon Henry James not by the persuasions of a committee nor by the solicitations of friends, but by a power much more commanding and irresistible---a power so large and of such immense significance to him that he scarcely succeeds with all his range of expression in saying what it was or all that it meant to him. It was Belgium, it was France, it was above all England and the English tradition, it was everything that he had ever cared for of civilization, beauty, and art threatened with destruction and arrayed before his imagination in one figure of tragic appeal.

Perhaps no other elderly man existed in August 1914 so well qualified to feel imaginatively all that the outbreak of war meant as Henry James. For years he had been appreciating ever more and more finely what he calls 'the rare, the sole, the exquisite England': he had relished her discriminatingly as only the alien, bred to different sounds and sights and circumstances, could relish others so distinct and so delightful in their distinctness. Knowing so well what she had given him, he was the more tenderly and scrupulously grateful to her for the very reason that

¹ Written in 1919

she seemed to him to bestow her gifts half in ignorance of their value. Thus when the news came that England was in danger he wandered in the August sunshine half overwhelmed with the vastness of what had happened, reckoning up his debt, conscious to the verge of agony of the extent to which he had committed his own happiness to her, and analysing incessantly and acutely just what it all meant to the world and to him. At first, as he owned, he had 'an elderly dread of a waste of emotion . . . my house of the spirit amid everything around me had become more and more the inhabited, adjusted, familiar home'; but before long he found himself

building additions and upper storeys, throwing out extensions and protrusions, indulging even, all recklessly, in gables and pinnacles and battlements -- things that had presently transformed the unpretending place into I scarce know what to call it, a fortress of the faith, a palace of the soul, an extravagant, bristling, flag-flying structure which had quite as much to do with the air as with the earth.

In a succession of images not to be torn from their context he paints the state of his mind confronted by one aspect after another of what appeared to him in so many diverse lights of glory and of tragedy. His gesture as of one shrinking from the sight of the distress, combined with an irresistible instinct of pity drawing him again and again to its presence, recalls to the present writer his reluctance to take a certain road in Rye because it led past the workhouse gates and forced to his notice the dismal line of tramps waiting for admittance. But in the case of the wounded and the fugitive his humanity forced him again and again to face the sight, and brought him the triumphant reward of finding that the beauty emerging from such conditions more than matched the squalor. ' . . . their presence', he wrote of the wounded soldier, 'is a blest renewal of faith.'

A moralist perhaps might object that terms of beauty and ugliness are not the terms in which to speak of so vast a catastrophe, nor should a writer exhibit so keen a curiosity as to the tremors and vibrations of his own spirit in face of the universal calamity. Yet, of all books describing the sights of war and appealing for our pity, this largely personal account is the one that best shows the dimensions of the whole. It is not merely or

even to any great extent that we have been stimulated intellectually by the genius of Henry James to analyse shades and subtleties; but rather that for the first and only time, so far as we are aware, someone has reached an eminence sufficiently high above the scene to give its grouping and standing in the universal. Read, for instance, the scene of the arrival of the Belgian refugees by night at Rye, which we will not curtail and thus rob of its completeness. It is precisely the same little scene of refugees hurrying by in silence save for the cry of a woman carrying her child, which, in its thousand varieties, a thousand pens have depicted during the past four years. They have done their best, and left us acknowledging their effort, but feeling it to be a kind of siege or battering ram laid to the emotions, which have obstinately refused to yield their fruits. That it is altogether otherwise with the scene painted for us by Henry James might perhaps be credited to his training as a novelist. But when, in his stately way, diminishing his stature not one whit and majestically rolling the tide of his prose over the most rocky of obstacles, he asks us for the gift of a motor-car, we cannot help feeling that if all philanthropies had such advocates our pockets would never be anything but empty. It is not that our emotions have been harassed by the sufferings of the individual case. That he can do upon occasion with beautiful effect. But what he does in this little book of less than a hundred and twenty pages is, so it seems to us, to present the best statement yet made of the largest point of view. He makes us understand what civilization meant to him and should mean to us. For him it was a spirit that overflowed the material bounds of countries, but it is in France that he sees it most plainly personified:

... what happens to France happens to all that part of ourselves which we are most proud, and most finely advised, to enlarge and cultivate and consecrate. . . . She is sole and single in this, that she takes charge of those of the interests of man which most dispose him to fraternize with himself, to pervade all his possibilities and to taste all his faculties, and in consequence to find and to make the earth a friendlier, an easier, and especially a more various sojourn.

If all our counsellors, we cannot help exclaiming, had spoken with that voice!

*II. The Older Order*¹

With this small volume,² which brings us down to about the year 1870, the memories of Henry James break off. It is more fitting to say that they break off than that they come to an end, for although we are aware that we shall hear his voice no more, there is no hint of exhaustion or of leave-taking; the tone is as rich and deliberate as if time were unending and matter infinite; what we have seems to be but the prelude to what we are to have, but a crumb, as he says, of a banquet now forever withheld. Someone speaking once incautiously in his presence of his 'completed' works drew from him the emphatic assertion that never, never so long as he lived could there be any talk of completion; his work would end only with his life; and it seems in accord with this spirit that we should feel ourselves pausing, at the end of a paragraph, while in imagination the next great wave of the wonderful voice curves into fullness.

All great writers have, of course, an atmosphere in which they seem most at their ease and at their best; a mood of the great general mind which they interpret and indeed almost discover, so that we come to read them rather for that than for any story or character or scene of separate excellence. For ourselves Henry James seems most entirely in his element, doing that is to say what everything favours his doing, when it is a question of recollection. The mellow light which swims over the past, the beauty which suffuses even the commonest little figures of that time, the shadow in which the detail of so many things can be discerned which the glare of day flattens out, the depth, the richness, the calm, the humour of the whole pageant—all this seems to have been his natural atmosphere and his most abiding mood. It is the atmosphere of all those stories in which aged Europe is the background for young America. It is the half-light in which he sees most, and sees farthest. To Americans, indeed, to Henry James and to Hawthorne, we owe the best relish of the past in our literature—not the past of romance and chivalry, but the immediate past of vanished dignity and faded fashions. The novels teem with it; but wonderful as they are, we are tempted to say that the

¹ Written in 1917² *The Middle Years*, by Henry James

memories are yet more wonderful, in that they are more exactly Henry James, and give more precisely his tone and his gesture. In them his benignity is warmer, his humour richer, his solicitude more exquisite, his recognition of beauty, fineness, humanity more instant and direct. He comes to his task with an indescribable air of one so charged and laden with precious stuff that he hardly knows how to divest himself of it all—where to find space to set down this and that, how to resist altogether the claims of some other gleaming object in the background; appearing so busy, so unwieldy with ponderous treasure that his dexterity is disposing of it, his consummate knowledge of how best to place each fragment, afford us the greatest delight that literature has had to offer for many a year. The mere sight is enough to make anyone who has ever held a pen in his hand consider his art afresh in the light of this extraordinary example of it. And our pleasure at the mere sight soon merges in the thrill with which we recognize, if not directly then by hearsay, the old world of London life which he brings out of the shades and sets tenderly and solidly before us as if his last gift were the most perfect and precious of the treasures hoarded in 'the scented chest of our savings'.

After the absence from Europe of about nine years which is recorded in *Notes of a Son and Brother*, he arrived in Liverpool on 1 March 1869, and found himself 'in the face of an opportunity that affected me then and there as the happiest, the most interesting, the most alluring and beguiling that could ever have opened before a somewhat disabled young man who was about to complete his twenty-sixth year'. He proceeded to London, and took up his lodging with a 'kind slim celibate', a Mr. Lazarus Fox—every detail is dear to him—who let out slices of his house in Half Moon Street to gentlemen lodgers. The London of that day, as Henry James at once proceeded to ascertain with those amazingly delicate and tenacious tentacles of his, was an extremely characteristic and uncompromising organism. 'The big broom of change' had swept it hardly at all since the days of Byron at least. She was still the 'unaccommodating and unaccommodated city . . . the city too indifferent, too proud, too unaware, too stupid even if one will, to enter any lists that involved her moving from her base and that thereby . . . enjoyed the enormous "pull", for making her impression, of ignoring everything but her own per-

versities and then of driving these home with an emphasis not to be gainsaid.' The young American ('brooding monster that I was, born to discriminate *à tout propos*') was soon breakfasting with the gentleman upstairs (Mr. Albert Rutson), eating his fried sole and marmalade with other gentlemen from the Home Office, the Foreign Office, the House of Commons, whose freedom to lounge over that meal impressed him greatly, and whose close questioning as to the composition of Grant's first Cabinet embarrassed him not a little. The whole scene, which it would be an impiety to dismember further, has the very breath of the age in it. The whiskers, the leisure, the intentness of those gentlemen upon politics, their conviction that the composition of Cabinets was the natural topic for the breakfast-table, and that a stranger unable, as Henry James found himself, to throw light upon it was 'only not perfectly ridiculous because perfectly insignificant'—all this provides a picture that many of us will be able to see again as we saw it once perhaps from the perch of an obliging pair of shoulders.

The main facts about that London, as all witnesses agree in testifying, were its smallness compared with our city, the limited number of distractions and amusements available, and the consequent tendency of all people worth knowing to know each other and to form a very accessible and, at the same time, highly enviable society. Whatever the quality that gained you admittance, whether it was that you had done something or showed yourself capable of doing something worthy of respect, the compliment was not an empty one. A young man coming up to London might in a few months claim to have met Tennyson, Browning, Matthew Arnold, Carlyle, Froude, George Eliot, Herbert Spencer, Huxley, and Mill. He had met them; he had not merely brushed against them in a crowd. He had heard them talk; he had even offered something of his own. The conditions of those days allowed a kind of conversation which, so the survivors always maintain, is an art unknown in what they are pleased to call our chaos. What with recurring dinner parties and Sunday calls, and country visits lasting far beyond the week-ends of our generation, the fabric of friendship was solidly built up and carefully preserved. The tendency perhaps was rather to a good fellowship in which the talk was wide-sweeping, extremely well informed, and impersonal than to the less formal, perhaps more

intense and indiscriminate, intimacies of today. We read of little societies of the sixties, the *Cosmopolitan* and the *Century*, meeting on Wednesday and on Sunday evenings to discuss the serious questions of the times, and we have the feeling that they could claim a more representative character than anything of the sort we can show now. We are left with the impression that whatever went forward in those days, either among the statesmen or among the men of letters—and there was a closer connexion than there is now—was promoted or inspired by the members of this group. Undoubtedly the resources of the day—and how magnificent they were!—were better organized; and it must occur to every reader of their memoirs that a reason is to be found in the simplicity which accepted the greatness of certain names and imposed something like order on their immediate neighbourhood. Having crowned their king they worshipped him with the most whole-hearted loyalty. Groups of people would come together at Freshwater, in that old garden where the houses of Melbury Road now stand, or in various London centres, and live as it seems to us for months at a time, some of them indeed for the duration of their lives, in the mood of the presiding genius. Watts and Burne-Jones in one quarter of the town, Carlyle in another, George Eliot in a third, almost as much as Tennyson in his island, imposed their laws upon a circle which *had* spirit and beauty to recommend it as well as an uncritical devotion.

Henry James, of course, was not a person to accept laws or to make one of any circle in a sense which implies the blunting of the critical powers. Happily for us, he came over not only with the hoarded curiosity of years, but also with the detachment of the stranger and the critical sense of the artist. He was immensely appreciative, but he was also immensely observant. Thus it comes about that his fragment revives, indeed stamps afresh, the great figures of the epoch, and, what is no less important, illumines the lesser figures by whom they were surrounded. Nothing could be happier than his portrait of Mrs. Greville, 'with her exquisite good nature and her innocent fatuity', who was, 'of course, very much an individual, but also a type of the enthusiastic sisterhood which, with all its extravagances and generousities and what we might unkindly, but not without the authority of Henry James, call absurdity, now seems extinct. We shall not spoil the

reader's impression of the superb passage describing a visit arranged by Mrs. Greville to George Eliot by revealing what happened on that almost tragic occasion. It is more excusable to dwell for a moment upon the drawing-room at Milford Cottage,

the most embowered retreat for social innocence that it was possible to conceive. . . . The red candles in the red shades have remained with me, inexplicably, as a vivid note of this pitch, shedding their rosy light, with the autumn gale, the averted reality, all shut out, upon such felicities of feminine helplessness as I couldn't have prefigured in advance, and as exemplified, for further gathering in, the possibilities of the old tone.

The drawn curtains, the 'copious service', the second volume of the new novel 'half-uncut' laid ready to hand, 'the exquisite head and incomparable brush of the domesticated collie'—that is the familiar setting. He recalls the high-handed manner in which these ladies took their way through life, baffling the very stroke of age and disaster with their unquenchable optimism, ladling out with both hands every sort of gift upon their passage, and bringing to port in their tow the most incongruous and battered of derelicts. No doubt 'a number of the sharp truths that one might privately apprehend beat themselves beautifully in vain' against such defences. Truth, so it seems to us, was not so much disregarded as flattered out of countenance by the energy with which they pursued the beautiful, the noble, the poetic, and ignored the possibility of another side of things. The extravagant steps which they would take to snare whatever grace or atmosphere they desired at the moment lent their lives in retrospect a glamour of adventure, aspiration, and triumph such as seems for good or for evil banished from our conscious and much more critical day. Was a friend ill? A wall would be knocked down to admit the morning sun. Did the doctor prescribe fresh milk? The only perfectly healthy cow in England was at your service. All this personal exuberance Henry James brings back in the figure of Mrs. Greville, 'friend of the super-eminent' and priestess at the different altars. Cannot we almost hear the 'pleasant growling note of Tennyson' answering her 'mild extravagance of homage' with 'Oh, yes, you may do what you like—so long as you don't kiss me before the cabman!'

And then with the entrance of Lady Waterford, Henry James ponders lovingly the quality which seems to hang about those days and people as the very scent of the flower—'the quality of personal beauty, to say nothing of personal accomplishment as our fathers were appointed to enjoy it. . . . Scarce to be sated that form of wonder, to my own imagination I confess.' Were they as beautiful as we like to remember them, or was it that the whole atmosphere made a beautiful presence, any sort of distinction or eminence indeed, felt in a way no longer so carefully arranged for, or so unquestionably accepted? Was it not all a part of the empty London streets, of the four-wheelers even, lined with straw, of the stuffy little boxes of the public dining-rooms, of the protectedness, of the leisure? But if they had merely to stand and be looked at, how splendidly they did it! A certain width of space seems to be a necessary condition for the blooming of such splendid plants as Lady Waterford, who, when she had dazzled sufficiently with her beauty and presence, had only to take up her brush to be acclaimed the equal of Titian or of Watts.

Personality, whatever one may mean by it, seems to have been accorded a licence for the expression of itself for which we can find no parallel in the present day. The gift if you had it was encouraged and sheltered beyond the bounds of what now seems possible. Tennyson, of course, is the supreme example of what we mean, and happily for us Henry James was duly taken to that shrine and gives with extraordinary skill a new version of the mystery which in our case will supersede the old. 'The fond prefigurements of youthful piety are predestined, more often than not, I think, experience interfering, to strange and violent shocks. . . . Fine, fine, fine, could he only be. . . .' So he begins, and so continuing for some time leads us up to the pronouncement that 'Tennyson was not Tennysonian'. The air one breathed at Aldworth was one in which nothing but 'the blest obvious, or at least the blest outright, could so much as attempt to live. . . . It was a large and simple and almost empty occasion. . . . He struck me in truth as neither knowing nor communicating knowledge.' He recited *Locksley Hall* and 'Oh dear, oh dear. . . . I heard him in cool surprise take even more out of his verse than he had put in.' And so by a series of qualifications which are all beautifully adapted to sharpen the image without in the least destroying it,

we are led to the satisfactory and convincing conclusion, 'My critical reaction hadn't in the least invalidated our great man's being a Bard—it had in fact made him and left him more a Bard than ever.' We see, really for the first time, how obvious and simple and almost empty it was, how 'the glory was without history', the poetic character 'more worn than paid for, or at least more saved than spent', and yet somehow the great man revives and flourishes in the new conditions and dawns upon us more of a Bard than we had got into the habit of thinking him. The same service of defining, limiting, and restoring to life he performs as beautifully for the ghost of George Eliot, and proclaims himself, as the faithful will be glad to hear, 'even a very Derondist of Derondists'.

And thus looking back into the past which is all changed and gone (he could mark, he said, the very hour of the change) Henry James performs a last act of piety which is supremely characteristic of him. The English world of that day was very dear to him; it had a fineness and a distinction which he professed half humorously not to find in our 'vast monotonous mob'. It had given him friendship and opportunity and much else, no doubt, that it had no consciousness of giving. Such a gift he of all people could never forget; and this book of memories sounds to us like a superb act of thanksgiving. What could he do to make up for it all, he seems to have asked himself. And then with all the creative power at his command he summons back the past and makes us a present of that. If we could have had the choice, that is what we should have chosen, not entirely for what it gives us of the dead, but also for what it gives us of him. Many will hear his voice again in these pages; they will perceive once more that solicitude for others, that immense desire to help which had its origin, one might guess, in the aloofness and loneliness of the artist's life. It seemed as if he were grateful for the chance of taking part in the ordinary affairs of the world, of assuring himself that, in spite of his absorption with the fine and remote things of the imagination, he had not lost touch with human interests. To acknowledge any claim that was in the least connected with the friends or memories of the past gave him, for this reason, a peculiar joy; and we can believe that if he could have chosen, his last words would have been like these, words of recollection and of love.

III. *The Letters of Henry James*¹

Who, on stepping from the cathedral dusk, the growl and boom of the organ still in the ears, and the eyes still shaded to observe better whatever intricacy of carving or richness of marble may be concealed, can breast the stir of the street and instantly and briskly sum up and deliver his impressions? How discriminate, how formulate? How, Henry James may be heard grimly asking, dare you pronounce any opinion whatever upon me? In the first place only by taking cover under some such figure as implies that, still dazed and well-nigh drowned, our gesture at the finish is more one of exclamation than of interpretation. To soothe and to inspirit there comes, a moment later, the consciousness that, although in the eyes of Henry James our attempt is foredoomed to failure, nevertheless his blessing is upon it. A renewal of life, on such terms as we can grant it, upon lips, in minds, here in London, here among English men and women, would receive from him the most generous acknowledgement; and with a royal complacency, he would admit that our activities could hardly be better employed. Nor are we left to grope without a guide. It would not be easy to find a difficult task better fulfilled than by Mr. Percy Lubbock in his Introduction and connecting paragraphs.² It seems to us, and this not only before reading the letters but more emphatically afterwards, that the lines of interpretation he lays down are the true ones. They end—as he is the first to declare—in the heart of darkness; but any understanding that we may have won of a difficult problem is at every point fortified and corrected by the help of his singularly thoughtful and intimate essay. His intervention is always illuminating.

It must be admitted that these remarks scarcely seem called for by anything specially abstruse in the first few chapters. If ever a young American proved himself capable of giving a clear and composed account of his experiences in Europe during the seventies of the last century that young American was Henry James. He recounts his seeings and doings, his dinings out and meetings, his country house visits, like a guest too well-bred to show surprise even if he feels it. A 'cosmopolitanized American',

¹ Written in 1920² *The Letters of Henry James*. Edited by Percy Lubbock

as he calls himself, was far more likely, it appears, to find things flat than to find them surprising; to sink into the depths of English civilization as if it were a soft feather bed inducing sleep and warmth and security rather than shocks and sensations. Henry James, of course, was much too busy recording impressions to fall asleep; it only appears that he never did anything, and never met anyone, in those early days, capable of rousing him beyond the gay and sprightly mood so easily and amusingly sustained in his letters home. Yet he went everywhere; he met everyone, as the sprinkling of famous names and great occasions abundantly testify. Let one fair specimen suffice:

Yesterday I dined with Lord Houghton—with Gladstone, Tennyson, Dr. Schliemann (the excavator of old Mycenae, &c.), and half a dozen other men of 'high culture'. I sat next but one to the Bard and heard most of his talk, which was all about port wine and tobacco; he seems to know much about them, and can drink a whole bottle of port at a sitting with no incommmodity. He is very swarthy and scraggy, and strikes one at first as much less handsome than his photos: but gradually you see that it's a face of genius. He had I know not what simplicity, speaks with a strange rustic accent and seemed altogether like a creature of some primordial English stock, a thousand miles away from American manufacture. Behold me after dinner conversing affably with Mr. Gladstone—not by my own seeking, but by the almost importunate affection of Lord H. But I was glad of a chance to feel the 'personality' of a great political leader—or as G. is now thought here even, I think, by his partisans, ex-leader. That of Gladstone is very fascinating—his urbanity extreme—his eye that of a man of genius—and his apparent self-surrender to what he is talking of without a flaw. He made a great impression on me—greater than anyone I have seen here: though 'tis perhaps owing to my *naïveté*, and unfamiliarity with statesmen . . .

And so to the Oxford and Cambridge boat-race. The impression is well and brightly conveyed; what we miss, perhaps, is any body of resistance to the impression—any warrant for thinking that the receiving mind is other than a stretched white sheet. The best comment upon that comes in his own words a few pages later. 'It is something to have learned how to write.' If we look upon many of these early pages as experiments in the art of writing by one whose standard of taste exacts that small things must be done

perfectly before big things are even attempted, we shall understand that their perfection is of the inexpressive kind that often precedes a late maturity. He is saying all that his means allow him to say. Moreover, he is saying it already, as most good letter-writers learn to say it, not to an individual but to a chosen assembly. 'It is, indeed, I think, the very essence of a good letter to be shown', he wrote; 'it is wasted if it is kept for *one*. . . I give you full leave to read mine aloud at your soirées!' Therefore, if we refrain from quotation, it is not that passages of the necessary quality are lacking. It is, rather, that while he writes charmingly, intelligently, and adequately of this, that, and the other, we begin by guessing and end by resenting the fact that his mind is elsewhere. It is not the dinner parties—a hundred and seven in one season—nor the ladies and gentlemen, nor even the Tennysons and the Gladstones that interest him primarily; the pageant passes before him: the impressions ceaselessly descend; and yet as we watch we also wait for the clue, the secret of it all. It is, indeed, clear that if he discharged the duties of his position with every appearance of equanimity the choice of the position itself was one of momentous importance, constantly requiring examination, and, with its promise of different possibilities, harassing his peace till the end of time. On what spot of the civilized globe was he to settle? His vibrations and vacillations in front of that problem suffer much in our report of them, but in the early days the case against America was simply that ' . . it takes an old civilization to set a novelist in motion'.

Next, Italy presented herself; but the seductions of 'the golden climate' were fatal to work. Paris had obvious advantages, but the drawbacks were equally positive—'I have seen almost nothing of the literary fraternity, and there are fifty reasons why I should not become intimate with them. I don't like their wares, and they don't like any others; and besides, they are not *accueillants*.' London exercised a continuous double pressure of attraction and repulsion to which finally he succumbed, to the extent of making his headquarters in the metropolis without shutting his eyes to her faults. 'I am attracted to London in spite of the long list of reasons why I should not be; I think it, on the whole, the best point of view in the world. . . But the question is interminable.' When he wrote that, he was thirty-seven; a

mature age; an age at which the native growing confidently in his own soil is already putting forth whatever flower fate ordains and natural conditions allow. But Henry James had neither roots nor soil; he was of the tribe of wanderers and aliens; a winged visitant, ceaselessly circling and seeking, unattached, uncommitted, ranging hither and thither at his own free will, and only at length precariously settling and delicately inserting his proboscis in the thick-set lusty blossoms of the old garden beds.

Here, then, we distinguish one of the strains, always to some extent present in the letters before us, from which they draw their unlikeness to any others in the language, and, indeed, bring us at times to doubt whether they are 'in the language' at all. If London is primarily a point of view, if the whole field of human activity is only a prospect and a pageant, then we cannot help asking, as the store of impressions heaps itself up, what is the aim of the spectator, what is the purpose of his hoard? A spectator, alert, aloof, endlessly interested, endlessly observant, Henry James undoubtedly was; but as obviously, though not so simply, the long-drawn process of adjustment and preparation was from first to last controlled and manipulated by a purpose which, as the years went by, only dealt more powerfully and completely with the treasures of a more complex sensibility. Yet, when we look to find the purpose expressed, to see the material in the act of transmutation, we are met by silence, we are blindly waved outside. 'To write a series of good little tales I deem ample work for a life time. It's at least a relief to have arranged one's life time.' The words are youthful, perhaps intentionally light; but few and frail as they are, they have almost alone to bear the burden built upon them, to answer the questions and quiet the suspicions of those who insist that a writer must have a mission and proclaim it aloud. Scarcely for a moment does Henry James talk of his writing; never for an instant is the thought of it absent from his mind. Thus, in the letters to Stevenson abroad we hear behind everything else a brooding murmur of amazement and horror at the notion of living with savages. How, he seems to be asking himself, while on the surface all is admiration and affection, can he endure it—how could I write my books if I lived in Samoa with savages? All refers to his writing; all points in to that preoccupation. But so far as actual statement goes the books might have sprung as silently and

spontaneously as daffodils in spring. No notice is taken of their birth. Nor does it matter to him what people say. Their remarks are probably wide of the point, or if they have a passing truth they are uttered in unavoidable ignorance of the fact that each book is a step onward in a gradual process of evolution, the plan of which is known only to the author himself. He remains inscurtable, silent, and assured.

How, then, are we to explain the apparent inconsistency of his disappointment when, some years later, the failure of *The Bostonians* and *Princess Casamassima* brought him face to face with the fact that he was not destined to be a popular novelist—

. . . I am still staggering [he wrote] a good deal under the mysterious and to me inexplicable injury wrought—apparently—upon my situation by my two last novels, the *Bostonians* and the *Princess*, from which I expected so much and derived so little. They have reduced the desire, and the demand, for my productions to zero—as I judge from the fact that though I have for a good while past been writing a number of good short things, I remain irremediably unpublished.

Compensations at once suggested themselves; he was 'really in better form than ever' and found himself 'holding the "critical world" at large in singular contempt'; but we have Mr. Lubbock's authority for supposing that it was chiefly a desire to retrieve the failure of the novels that led him to strive so strenuously, and in the end so disastrously, for success upon the stage. Success and failure upon the lips of a man who never for a moment doubted the authenticity of his genius or for a second lowered his standard of the artist's duty have not their ordinary meaning. Perhaps we may hold that failure in the sense that Henry James used it meant, more than anything, failure on the part of the public to receive. That was the public's fault, but that did not lessen the catastrophe or make less desirable the vision of an order of things where the public gratefully and with understanding accepts at the artist's hands what is, after all, the finest essence, transmuted and returned, of the public itself. When *Guy Domville* failed, and Henry James for one 'abominable quarter of an hour' faced the 'yelling barbarians' and 'learned what could be the savagery of their disappointment that one wasn't perfectly the *same* as everything

else they had ever seen' he had no doubt of his genius; but he went home to reflect:

I have felt for a long time past that I have fallen upon evil days—every sign and symbol of one's being in the least wanted, anywhere or by anyone, having so utterly failed. A new generation, that I know not, and mainly prize not, has taken universal possession.

The public henceforward appeared to him, so far as it appeared at all, a barbarian crowd incapable of taking in their rude paws the beauty and delicacy that he had to offer. More and more was he confirmed in his conviction that an artist can neither live with the public, write for it, nor seek his material in the midst of it. A select group, representative of civilization, had at the same time protested its devotion, but how far can one write for a select group? It is not genius itself restricted, or at least influenced in its very essence by the consciousness that its gifts are to the few, its concern with the few, and its revelation apparent only to scattered enthusiasts who may be the advance guard of the future or only a little band strayed from the high road and doomed to extinction while civilization marches irresistibly elsewhere? All this Henry James poised, pondered, and held in debate. No doubt the influence upon the direction of his work was profound. But for all that he went serenely forward; bought a house, bought a typewriter, shut himself up, surrounded himself with furniture of the right period, and was able at the critical moment by the timely, though rash, expenditure of a little capital to ensure that certain hideous new cottages did not deface his point of view. One admits to a momentary malice. The seclusion is so deliberate; the exclusion so complete. All within the sanctuary is so prosperous and smooth. No private responsibilities harassed him; no public duties claimed him; his health was excellent and his income, in spite of his protests to the contrary, more than adequate to his needs. The voice that issued from the hermitage might well speak calmly, subtly, of exquisite emotions, and yet now and then we are warned by something exacting and even acid in its tone that the effects of seclusion are not altogether benign. 'Yes, Ibsen is ugly, common, hard, prosaic, bottomlessly bourgeois. . . .' 'But, oh, yes, dear Louis, [*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*] is vile. The pretence

of "sexuality" is only equalled by the absence of it, and the abomination of the language by the author's reputation for style.' The lack of 'aesthetic curiosity' in Meredith and his circle was highly to be deplored. The artist in him 'was nothing to the good citizen and liberalized bourgeois'. The works of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky are 'fluid puddings', and 'when you ask me if I don't feel Dostoevsky's "mad jumble, that flings things down in a heap"', nearer truth and beauty than the picking up and composing that you instance in Stevenson, I reply with emphasis that I feel nothing of the sort'. It is true that in order to keep these points at their sharpest one has had to brush aside a mass of qualification and explanation which make each the apex of a formidable body of criticism. It is only for a moment that the seclusion seems cloistered, and the feelings of an artist confounded with those of a dilettante.

Yet as that second flits across the mind, with the chill of a shadow brushing the waves, we realize what a catastrophe for all of us it would have been if the prolonged experiment, the struggle and the solitude of Henry James's life had ended in failure. Excuses could have been found both for him and for us. It is impossible, one might have said, for the artist not to compromise, or, if he persists in his allegiance, then, almost inevitably, he must live apart, for ever alien, slowly perishing in his isolation. The history of literature is strewn with examples of both disasters. When, therefore, almost perceptibly at a given moment, late in the story, something yields, something is overcome, something dark and dense glows in splendour, it is as if the beacon flamed bright on the hilltop; as if before our eyes the crown of long-deferred completion and culmination swung slowly into place. Not columns but pages, and not pages but chapters, might be filled with comment and attempted analysis of this late and mighty flowering, this vindication, this crowded gathering together and superb welding into shape of all the separate strands, alien instincts, irreconcilable desires of the twofold nature. For, as we dimly perceive, here at last two warring forces have coalesced; here, by a prodigious effort of concentration, the field of human activity is brought into fresh focus, revealing new horizons, new landmarks, and new lights upon it of right and wrong.

But it is for the reader at leisure to delve in the rich material of

the later letters and build up from it the complex figure of the artist in his completeness. If we choose two passages—one upon conduct, the other upon the gift of a leather dressing-case—to represent Henry James in his later mood we purposely brush aside a thousand others which have innumerable good claims to be put in their place.

If there be a wisdom in not feeling—to the last throb—the great things that happen to us, it is a wisdom that I shall never either know or esteem. Let your soul live—it's the only life that isn't on the whole a sell. . . .

That [the dressing-case] is the grand fact of the situation—that is the tawny lion, portentous creature in my path. I can't get past him, I can't get round him, and on the other hand he stands glaring at me, refusing to give way and practically blocking all my future. I can't live with him, you see; because I can't live *up* to him. His claims, his pretensions, his dimensions, his assumptions and consumptions, above all the manner in which he causes every surrounding object (on my poor premises or within my poor range) to tell a dingy or deplorable tale—all this makes him the very scourge of my life, the very blot on my scutcheon. He doesn't regild that rusty metal—he simply takes up an attitude of gorgeous swagger, straight in front of all the rust and the rubbish, which makes me look as if I had stolen *somebody else's* (regarnished *blason*) and were trying to palm it off as my own. . . . *He is out of the picture* --out of *mine*; and behold me condemned to live for ever with that canvas turned to the wall. Do you know what that means?

And so on and so on. There, portentous and prodigious, we hear unmistakably the voice of Henry James. There, to our thinking, we have exploded in our ears the report of his enormous, sustained, increasing, and overwhelming love for life. It issues from whatever tortuous channels and dark tunnels like a flood at its fullest. There is nothing too little, too large, too remote, too queer for it not to flow round, float off, and make its own. Nothing in the end has chilled or repressed him; everything has fed and filled him; the saturation is complete. The labours of the morning might be elaborate and austere. There remained an irrepressible fund of vitality which the flying hand at midnight addressed fully and affectionately to friend after friend, each sentence, from the whole fling of his person to the last snap of his fingers, firmly

fashioned and throwing out at its swiftest well-nigh incredible felicities of phrase.

The only difficulty, perhaps, was to find an envelope that would contain the bulky product, or any reason, when two sheets were blackened, for not filling a third. Truly, Lamb House was no sanctuary, but rather a 'small, crammed, and wholly unlucrative hotel', and the hermit no meagre solitary but a tough and even stoical man of the world, English in his humour, Johnsonian in his sanity, who lived every second with insatiable gusto and in the flux and fury of his impressions obeyed his own injunction to remain 'as solid and fixed and dense as you can'. For to be as subtle as Henry James one must also be as robust; to enjoy his power of exquisite selection one must have 'lived and loved and cursed and floundered and enjoyed and suffered', and, with the appetite of a giant, have swallowed the whole.

Yet, if he shared with magnanimity, if he enjoyed hugely, there remained something incommunicable, something reserved, as if in the last resort, it was not to us that he turned, nor from us that he received, nor into our hands that he placed his offerings. There they stand, the many books, products of 'an inexhaustible sensibility', all with the final seal upon them of artistic form, which, as it imposes its stamp, sets apart the object thus consecrated and makes it no longer part of ourselves. In this impersonality the maker himself desired to share—'to take it', as he said, 'wholly, exclusively with the pen (the style, the genius) and absolutely not at all with the person', to be 'the mask without the face', the alien in our midst, the worker who when his work is done turns even from that and reserves his confidence for the solitary hour, like that at midnight when, alone on the threshold of creation, Henry James speaks aloud to himself 'and the prospect clears and flushes, and my poor blest old genius pats me so admirably and lovingly on the back that I turn, I screw round, and bend my lips to passionately, in my gratitude, kiss its hands'. So that is why, perhaps, as life swings and clangs, booms and reverberates, we have the sense of an altar of service, of sacrifice, to which, as we pass out, we bend the knee.

Henry James's Ghost Stories¹

IT is plain that Henry James was a good deal attracted by the ghost story, or, to speak more accurately, by the story of the supernatural. He wrote at least eight of them, and if we wish to see what led him to do so, and what opinion he had of his success, nothing is simpler than to read his own account in the preface to the volume containing *Altar of the Dead*. Yet perhaps we shall keep our own view more distinct if we neglect the preface. As the years go by certain qualities appear, and others disappear. We shall only muddle our own estimate if we try, dutifully, to make it square with the verdict which the author at the time passed on his own work. For example, what did Henry James say of *The Great Good Place*?

There remains *The Great Good Place* (1900)—to the spirit of which, however, it strikes me that any gloss or comment would be a tactless challenge. It embodies a calculated effect, and to plunge into it, I find, even for a beguiled glance—a course I indeed recommend—is to have left all else outside.

And to us, in 1921, *The Great Good Place* is a failure. It is another example of the fact that when a writer is completely and even ecstatically conscious of success he has, as likely as not, written his worst. We ought, we feel, to be inside, and we remain coldly outside. Something has failed to work, and we are inclined to accuse the supernatural. The challenge may be tactless, but challenge it we must.

That *The Great Good Place* begins admirably, no one will deny. Without the waste of a word we find ourselves at once in the heart of a situation. The harassed celebrity, George Dane, is surrounded by unopened letters and unread books; telegrams arrive; invitations accumulate; and the things of value lie hopelessly buried beneath the litter. Meanwhile, Brown the manservant announces that a strange young man has arrived to breakfast. Dane touches the young man's hand, and, at this culminating point of annoy-

¹ *Times Literary Supplement*, December 22, 1921

ance, lapses into a trance or wakes up in another world. He finds himself in a celestial rest-cure establishment. Far bells toll; flowers are fragrant; and after a time the inner life revives. But directly the change is accomplished we are aware that something is wrong with the story. The movement flags; the emotion is monotonous. The enchanter waves his wand and the cows go on grazing. All the characteristic phrases are there in waiting—the silver bowls, the melted hours—but there is no work for them to do. The story dwindles to a sweet soliloquy. Dane and the Brothers become angelic allegorical figures pacing a world that is like ours but smoother and emptier. As if he felt the need of something hard and objective the author invokes the name of the city of Bradford; but it is vain. *The Great Good Place* is an example of the sentimental use of the supernatural and for that reason no doubt Henry James would be likely to feel that he had been more than usually intimate and expressive.

The other stories will presently prove that the supernatural offers great prizes as well as great risks; but let us for a moment dwell upon the risks. The first is undoubtedly that it removes the shocks and buffetings of experience. In the breakfast-room with Brown and the telegram Henry James was forced to keep moving by the pressure of reality; the door must open; the hour must strike. Directly he sank through the solid ground he gained possession of a world which he could fashion to his liking. In the dream world the door need not open; the clock need not strike; beauty is to be had for the asking. But beauty is the most perverse of spirits; it seems as if she must pass through ugliness or lie down with disorder before she can rise in her own person. The ready-made beauty of the dream world produces only an anaemic and conventionalized version of the world we know. And Henry James was much too fond of the world we know to create one that we do not know. The visionary imagination was by no means his. His genius was dramatic, not lyric. Even his characters wilt in the thin atmosphere he provides for them, and we are presented with a Brother when we would much rather grasp the substantial person of Brown.

We have been piling the risks, rather unfairly, upon one story in particular. The truth is perhaps that we have become fundamentally sceptical. Mrs. Radcliffe amused our ancestors because

they were our ancestors; because they lived with very few books, an occasional post, a newspaper superannuated before it reached them, in the depths of the country or in a town which resembled the more modest of our villages, with long hours to spend sitting over the fire drinking wine by the light of half a dozen candles. Nowadays we breakfast upon a richer feast of horror than served them for a twelvemonth. We are tired of violence; we suspect mystery. Surely, we might say to a writer set upon the supernatural, there are facts enough in the world to go round; surely it is safer to stay in the breakfast-room with Brown. Moreover, we are impervious to fear. Your ghosts will only make us laugh, and if you try to express some tender and intimate vision of a world stripped of its hide we shall be forced (and there is nothing more uncomfortable) to look the other way. But writers, if they are worth their salt, never take advice. They always run risks. To admit that the supernatural was used for the last time by Mrs. Radcliffe and that modern nerves are immune from the wonder and terror which ghosts have always inspired would be to throw up the sponge too easily. If the old methods are obsolete, it is the business of a writer to discover new ones. The public can feel again what it has once felt—there can be no doubt about that; only from time to time the point of attack must be changed.

How consciously Henry James set himself to look for the weak place in our armour of insensibility it is not necessary to decide. Let us turn to another story, *The Friends of the Friends*, and judge whether he succeeded. This is the story of a man and woman who have been trying for years to meet but only accomplish their meeting on the night of the woman's death. After her death the meetings are continued, and when this is divined by the woman he is engaged to marry she refuses to go on with the marriage. The relationship is altered. Another person, she says, has come between them. 'You see her—you see her; you see her every night!' It is what we have come to call a typically Henry James situation. It is the same theme that was treated with enormous elaboration in *The Wings of the Dove*. Only there, when Milly has come between Kate and Densher and altered their relationship for ever, she has ceased to exist; here the anonymous lady goes on with her work after death. And yet—does it make very much difference? Henry James has only to take the smallest steps and he is over the

border. His characters with their extreme fineness of perception are already half-way out of the body. There is nothing violent in their release. They seem rather to have achieved at last what they have long been attempting—communication without obstacle. But Henry James, after all, kept his ghosts for his ghost stories. Obstacles are essential to *The Wings of the Dove*. When he removed them by supernatural means as he did in *The Friends of the Friends* he did so in order to produce a particular effect. The story is very short; there is no time to elaborate the relationship; but the point can be pressed home by a shock. The supernatural is brought in to provide that shock. It is the queerest of shocks—tranquil, beautiful, like the closing of chords in harmony; and yet, somehow obscene. The living and the dead by virtue of their superior sensibility have reached across the gulf; that is beautiful. The live man and the dead woman have met alone at night. They have their relationship. The spiritual and the carnal meeting together produce a strange emotion—not exactly fear, nor yet excitement. It is a feeling that we do not immediately recognize. There is a weak spot in our armour somewhere. Perhaps Henry James will penetrate by methods such as these.

Next, however, we turn to *Owen Wingrave*, and the enticing game of pinning your author to the board by detecting once more traces of his fineness, his subtlety, whatever his prevailing characteristics may be, is rudely interrupted. Pinioned, tied down, to all appearance lifeless, up he jumps and walks away. Somehow one has forgotten to account for the genius, for the driving power which is so incalculable and so essential. With Henry James in particular we tend, in wonder at his prodigious dexterity, to forget that he had a crude and simple passion for telling stories. The preface to *Owen Wingrave* throws light upon that fact, and incidentally suggests why it is that *Owen Wingrave* as a ghost story misses its mark. One summer's afternoon, many years ago, he tells us, he sat on a penny chair under a great tree in Kensington Gardens. A slim young man sat down upon another chair near by and began to read a book.

Did the young man then, on the spot, just become Owen Wingrave, establishing by the mere magic of type the situation, creating at a stroke all the implications and filling out all the pictures? . . . my poor point is only that at the beginning of my

session in the penny chair the seedless fable hadn't a claim to make or an excuse to give, and that, the very next thing, the penny-worth still partly unconsumed, it was fairly bristling with pretexts. 'Dramatize it, dramatize it!' would seem to have rung with sudden intensity in my ears.

So the theory of a conscious artist taking out his little grain of matter and working it into the finished fabric is another of our critical fables. The truth appears to be that he sat on a chair, saw a young man, and fell asleep. At any rate, once the group, the man, or perhaps only the sky and the trees become significant, the rest is there inevitably. Given Owen Wingrave, then Spencer Coyle, Mrs. Coyle, Kate Julian, the old house, the season, the atmosphere must be in existence. Owen Wingrave implies all that. The artist has simply to see that the relations between these places and people are the right ones. When we say that Henry James had a passion for story-telling we mean that when his significant moment came to him the accessories were ready to flock in.

In this instance they flocked in almost too readily. There they are on the spot with all the stir and importance that belong to living people. Miss Wingrave seated in her Baker Street lodging with 'a fat catalogue of the Army and Navy Stores, which reposed on a vast desolate table-cover of false blue'; Mrs. Coyle, 'a fair fresh slow woman', who admitted and indeed gloried in the fact that she was in love with her husband's pupils, 'Which shows that the subject between them was treated in a liberal spirit'; Spencer Coyle himself, and the boy Lechmere—all bear, of course, upon the question of Owen's temperament and situation, and yet they bear on so many other things besides. We seem to be settling in for a long absorbing narrative; and then, rudely, incongruously, a shriek rings out; poor Owen is found stretched on the threshold of the haunted room; the supernatural has cut the book in two. It is violent; it is sensational; but if Henry James himself were to ask us: 'Now, have I frightened you?' we should be forced to reply: 'Not a bit'. The catastrophe has not the right relations to what has gone before. The vision in Kensington Gardens did not, perhaps, embrace the whole. Out of sheer bounty the author has given us a scene rich in possibilities—a young man whose problem (he detests war and is condemned to be a soldier) has a deep psychological interest; a girl whose subtlety and oddity are purposely defined

as if in readiness for future use. Yet what use is made of them? Kate Julian has merely to dare a young man to sleep in a haunted room; a plump Miss from a parsonage would have done as well. What use is made of the supernatural? Poor Owen Wingrave is knocked on the head by the ghost of an ancestor; a stable bucket in a dark passage would have done it better.

The stories in which Henry James uses the supernatural effectively are, then, those where some quality in a character or in a situation can only be given its fullest meaning by being cut free from facts. Its progress in the unseen world must be closely related to what goes on in this. We must be made to feel that the apparition fits the crisis of passion or of conscience which sent it forth so exactly that the ghost story, besides its virtues as a ghost story, has the additional charm of being also symbolical. Thus the ghost of Sir Edmund Orme appears to the lady who jilted him long ago whenever her daughter shows signs of becoming engaged. The apparition is the result of her guilty conscience, but it is more than that. It is the guardian of the rights of lovers. It fits what has gone before; it completes. The use of the supernatural draws out a harmony which would otherwise be inaudible. We hear the first note close at hand, and *then*, a moment after, the second chimes far away.

Henry James's ghosts have nothing in common with the violent old ghosts—the blood-stained sea captains, the white horses, the headless ladies of dark lanes and windy commons. They have their origin within us. They are present whenever the significant overflows our powers of expressing it; whenever the ordinary appears ringed by the strange. The baffling things that are left over, the frightening ones that persist—these are the emotions that he takes, embodies, makes consoling and companionable. But how can we be afraid? As the gentleman says when he has seen the ghost of Sir Edmund Orme for the first time: 'I was ready to answer for it to all and sundry that ghosts are much less alarming and more amusing than was commonly supposed'. The beautiful urbane spirits are only not of this world because they are too fine for it. They have taken with them across the border their clothes, their manners, their breeding, their band-boxes, and valets and ladies' maids. They remain always a little worldly. We may feel clumsy in their presence, but we cannot feel afraid. What does it matter,

then, if we do pick up *The Turn of the Screw* an hour or so before bedtime? After an exquisite entertainment we shall, if the other stories are to be trusted, end with this fine music in our ears, and sleep the sounder.

Perhaps it is the silence that first impresses us. Everything at Bly is so profoundly quiet. The twitter of birds at dawn, the far-away cries of children, faint footsteps in the distance stir it but leave it unbroken. It accumulates; it weighs us down; it makes us strangely apprehensive of noise. At last the house and garden die out beneath it. 'I can hear again, as I write, the intense hush in which the sounds of evening dropped. The rooks stopped cawing in the golden sky, and the friendly evening hour lost for the unspeakable minute all its voice.' It is unspeakable. We know that the man who stands on the tower staring down at the governess beneath is evil. Some unutterable obscenity has come to the surface. It tries to get in; it tries to get at something. The exquisite little beings who lie innocently asleep must at all costs be protected. But the horror grows. Is it possible that the little girl, as she turns back from the window, has seen the woman outside? Has she been with Miss Jessel? Has Quint visited the boy? It is Quint who hangs about us in the dark; who is there in that corner and again there in that. It is Quint who must be reasoned away, and for all our reasoning returns. Can it be that we are afraid? But it is not a man with red hair and a white face whom we fear. We are afraid of something, perhaps, in ourselves. In short, we turn on the light. If by its beams we examine the story in safety, note how masterly the telling is, how each sentence is stretched, each image filled, how beauty and obscenity twined together worm their way to the depths—still we must own that something remains unaccounted for. We must admit that Henry James has conquered. That courtly, worldly, sentimental old gentleman can still make us afraid of the dark.

The Supernatural in Fiction¹

WHEN Miss Scarborough² describes the results of her inquiries into the supernatural in fiction as 'suggestive rather than exhaustive' we have only to add that in any discussion of the supernatural suggestion is perhaps more useful than an attempt at science. To mass together all sorts of cases of the supernatural in literature without much more system or theory than the indication of dates supplies leaves the reader free where freedom has a special value. Perhaps some psychological law lies hidden beneath the hundreds of stories about ghosts and abnormal states of mind (for stories about abnormal states of mind are included with those that are strictly supernatural) which are referred to in her pages; but in our twilight state it is better to guess than to assert, to feel than to classify our feelings. So much evidence of the delight which human nature takes in stories of the supernatural will inevitably lead one to ask what this interest implies both in the writer and in the reader.

In the first place, how are we to account for the strange human craving for the pleasure of feeling afraid which is so much involved in our love of ghost stories? It is pleasant to be afraid when we are conscious that we are in no kind of danger, and it is even more pleasant to be assured of the mind's capacity to penetrate those barriers which for twenty-three hours out of the twenty-four remain impassable. Crude fear, with its anticipation of physical pain or of terrifying uproar, is an undignified and demoralizing sensation, while the mastery of fear only produces a respectable mask of courage, which is of no great interest to ourselves, although it may impose upon others. But the fear which we get from reading ghost stories of the supernatural is a refined and spiritualized essence of fear. It is a fear which we can examine and play with. Far from despising ourselves for being frightened by a ghost story we are proud of this proof of sensibility, and perhaps unconsciously welcome the chance for the licit gratification of certain instincts which we are wont to treat as outlaws. It is worth noticing that

¹ *Times Literary Supplement*, January 31st, 1918

² *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction*, by Dorothy Scarborough

the craving for the supernatural in literature coincided in the eighteenth century with a period of rationalism in thought, as if the effect of damming the human instincts at one point causes them to overflow at another. Such instincts were certainly at full flood when the writings of Mrs. Radcliffe were their chosen channel. Her ghosts and ruins have long suffered the fate which so swiftly waits upon any exaggeration of the supernatural and substitutes our ridicule for our awe. But although we are quick to throw away imaginative symbols which have served our turn, the desire persists. Mrs. Radcliffe may vanish, but the craving for the supernatural survives. Some element of the supernatural is so constant in poetry that one has come to look upon it as part of the normal fabric of the art; but in poetry, being etherealized, it scarcely provokes any emotion so gross as fear. Nobody was ever afraid to walk down a dark passage after reading *The Ancient Mariner*, but rather inclined to venture out to meet whatever ghosts must deign to visit him. Probably some degree of reality is necessary in order to produce fear; and reality is best conveyed by prose. Certainly one of the finest ghost stories, *Wandering Willie's Tale* in *Redgauntlet*, gains immensely from the homely truth of the setting, to which the use of the Scotch dialect contributes. The hero is a real man, the country is as solid as can be; and suddenly in the midst of the green and grey landscape opens up the crimson transparency of Redgauntlet Castle with the dead sinners at their feasting.

The superb genius of Scott here achieves a triumph which should keep this story immortal however the fashion in the supernatural may change. Steenie Steenson is himself so real and his belief in the phantoms is so vivid that we draw our fear through our perception of his fear, the story itself being of a kind that has ceased to frighten us. In fact, the vision of the dead carousing would now be treated in a humorous, romantic or perhaps patriotic spirit, but scarcely with any hope of making our flesh creep. To do that the author must change his direction; he must seek to terrify us not by the ghosts of the dead, but by those ghosts which are living within ourselves. The great increase of the psychical ghost story in late years, to which Miss Scarborough bears witness, testifies to the fact that our sense of our own ghostliness has much quickened. A rational age is succeeded by one

which seeks the supernatural in the soul of man, and the development of psychical research offers a basis of disputed fact for this desire to feed upon. Henry James, indeed, was of opinion before writing *The Turn of the Screw* that 'the good, the really effective and heart-shaking ghost stories (roughly so to term them) appeared all to have been told. . . . The new type, indeed, the mere modern 'psychical case', washed clean of all queerness as by exposure to a flowing laboratory tap, . . . the new type clearly promised little.' Since *The Turn of the Screw*, however, and no doubt largely owing to that masterpiece, the new type has justified its existence by rousing, if not 'the dear old sacred terror', still a very effective modern representative. If you wish to guess what our ancestors felt when they read *The Mysteries of Udolpho* you cannot do better than read *The Turn of the Screw*.

Experiment proves that the new fear resembles the old in producing physical sensations as of erect hair, dilated pupils, rigid muscles, and an intensified perception of sound and movement. But what is it that we are afraid of? We are not afraid of ruins, or moonlight, or ghosts. Indeed, we should be relieved to find that Quint and Miss Jessel are ghosts, but they have neither the substance nor the independent existence of ghosts. The odious creatures are much closer to us than ghosts have ever been. The governess is not so much frightened of them as of the sudden extension of her own field of perception, which in this case widens to reveal to her the presence all about her of an unmentionable evil. The appearance of the figures is an illustration, not in itself specially alarming, of a state of mind which is profoundly mysterious and terrifying. It is a state of mind; even the external objects are made to testify to their subjection. The oncoming of the state is preceded not by the storms and howlings of the old romances, but by an absolute hush and lapse of nature which we feel to represent the ominous trance of her own mind. 'The rooks stopped cawing in the golden sky, and the friendly evening hour lost for the unspeakable minute all its voice.' The horror of the story comes from the force with which it makes us realize the power that our minds possess for such excursions into the darkness; when certain lights sink or certain barriers are lowered, the ghosts of the mind, untracked desires, indistinct intimations, are seen to be a large company.

In the hands of such masters as Scott and Henry James the

supernatural is so wrought in with the natural that fear is kept from a dangerous exaggeration into simple disgust or disbelief verging upon ridicule. Mr. Kipling's stories *The Mark of the Beast* and *The Return of Imray* are powerful enough to repel one by their horror, but they are too violent to appeal to our sense of wonder. For it would be a mistake to suppose that supernatural fiction always seeks to produce fear, or that the best ghost stories are those which most accurately and medically described abnormal states of mind. On the contrary, a vast amount of fiction both in prose and in verse now assures us that the world to which we shut our eyes is far more friendly and inviting, more beautiful by day and more holy by night, than the world which we persist in thinking the real world. The country is peopled with nymphs and dryads, and Pan, far from being dead, is at his pranks in all the villages of England. Much of this mythology is used not for its own sake, but for purposes of satire and allegory; but there exists a group of writers who have the sense of the unseen without such alloy. Such a sense may bring visions of fairies or phantoms, or it may lead to a quickened perception of the relations existing between men and plants, or houses and their inhabitants, or any one of those innumerable alliances which somehow or other we spin between ourselves and other objects in our passage.

George Gissing

‘DO you know there are men in London who go the round of the streets selling paraffin oil?’ wrote George Gissing in the year 1880, and the phrase because it is Gissing’s calls up a world of fog and four-wheelers, of slatternly landladies, of struggling men of letters, of gnawing domestic misery, of gloomy back streets, and ignoble yellow chapels; but also, above this misery, we see tree-crowned heights, the columns of the Parthenon, and the hills of Rome. For Gissing is one of those imperfect novelists through whose books one sees the life of the author faintly covered by the lives of fictitious people. With such writers we establish a personal rather than an artistic relationship. We approach them through their lives as much as through their work, and when we take up Gissing’s letters, which have character, but little wit and no brilliance to illumine them, we feel that we are filling in a design which we began to trace out when we read *Demos* and *New Grub Street* and *The Nether World*.

Yet here, too, there are gaps in plenty, and many dark places left unlit. Much information has been kept back, many facts necessarily omitted. The Gissings were poor, and their father died when they were children; there were many of them, and they had to scrape together what education they could get. George, his sister said, had a passion for learning. He would rush off to school with a sharp herring bone in his throat for fear of missing his lesson. He would copy out from a little book called *That’s It* the astonishing number of eggs that the tench lays and the sole lays and the carp lays, ‘because I think it is a fact worthy of attention’. She remembers his ‘overwhelming veneration’ for intellect, and how patiently, sitting beside her, the tall boy with the high white forehead and the short-sighted eyes would help her with her Latin, ‘giving the same explanation time after time without the least sign of impatience’.

Partly because he revered facts and had no faculty it seems (his language is meagre and unmetaphorical) for impressions, it is doubtful whether his choice of a novelist’s career was a happy one.

There was the whole world, with its history and its literature, inviting him to haul it into his mind; he was eager; he was intellectual; yet he must sit down in hired rooms and spin novels about 'earnest young people striving for improvement in, as it were, the dawn of a new phase of our civilization'.

But the art of fiction is infinitely accommodating, and it was quite ready about the year 1880 to accept into its ranks a writer who wished to be the 'mouthpiece of the advanced Radical Party', who was determined to show in his novels the ghastly condition of the poor and the hideous injustice of society. The art of fiction was ready, that is, to agree that such books were novels; but it was doubtful if such novels would be read. Smith Elder's reader summed up the situation tersely enough. Mr. Gissing's novel, he wrote, 'is too painful to please the ordinary novel reader, and treats of scenes that can never attract the subscribers to Mr. Mudie's Library'. So, dining off lentils and hearing the men cry paraffin for sale in the streets of Islington, Gissing paid for the publication himself. It was then that he formed the habit of getting up at five in the morning in order to tramp half across London and coach Mr. M. before breakfast. Often enough Mr. M. sent down word that he was already engaged, and then another page was added to the dismal chronicle of life in modern *Grub Street*—we are faced by another of those problems with which literature is sown so thick. The writer has dined upon lentils; he gets up at five; he walks across London; he finds Mr. M. still in bed, whereupon he stands forth as the champion of life as it is, and proclaims that ugliness is truth, truth ugliness, and that is all we know and all we need to know. But there are signs that the novel resents such treatment. To use a burning consciousness of one's own misery, of the shackles that cut one's own limbs, to quicken one's sense of life in general, as Dickens did, to shape out of the murk which has surrounded one's childhood some resplendent figure such as Micawber or Mrs. Gamp, is admirable: but to use personal suffering to rivet the reader's sympathy and curiosity upon your private case is disastrous. Imagination is as its freest when it is most generalized; it loses something of its sweep and power, it becomes petty and personal, when it is limited to the consideration of a particular case calling for sympathy.

At the same time the sympathy which identifies the author with

his hero is a passion of great intensity; it makes the pages fly; it lends what has perhaps little merit artistically another and momentarily perhaps a keener edge. Biffen and Reardon had, we say to ourselves, bread and butter and sardines for supper; so had Gissing; Biffen's overcoat had been pawned, and so had Gissing's; Reardon could not write on Sunday; no more could Gissing. We forget whether it was Reardon who loved cats or Gissing who loved barrel organs. Certainly both Reardon and Gissing bought their copies of Gibbon at a second-hand bookstall, and lugged the volumes home one by one through the fog. So we go on capping these resemblances, and each time we succeed, a little glow of satisfaction comes over us, as if novel-reading were a game of skill in which the puzzle set us is to find the face of the writer.

We know Gissing thus as we do not know Hardy or George Eliot. Where the great novelist flows in and out of his characters and bathes them in an element which seems to be common to us all, Gissing remains solitary, self-centred, apart. His is one of those sharp lights beyond whose edges all is vapour and phantom. But mixed with this sharp light is one ray of singular penetration. With all his narrowness of outlook and meagreness of sensibility, Gissing is one of the extremely rare novelists who believes in the power of the mind, who makes his people think. They are thus differently poised from the majority of fictitious men and women. The awful hierarchy of the passions is slightly displaced. Social snobbery does not exist; money is desired almost entirely to buy bread and butter; love itself takes a second place. But the brain works, and that alone is enough to give us a sense of freedom. For to think is to become complex; it is to overflow boundaries, to cease to be a 'character', to merge one's private life in the life of politics or art or ideas, to have relationships based partly on them, and not on sexual desire alone. The impersonal side of life is given its due place in the scheme. 'Why don't people write about the really important things of life?' Gissing makes one of his characters exclaim, and at the unexpected cry the horrid burden of fiction begins to slip from the shoulders. Is it possible that we are going to talk of other things besides falling in love, important though that is, and going to dinner with Duchesses, fascinating though that is? Here in Gissing is a gleam of recognition that Darwin had

lived, that science was developing, that people read books and look at pictures, that once upon a time there was such a place as Greece. It is the consciousness of these things that makes his books such painful reading; it was this that made it impossible for them to 'attract the subscribers to Mr. Mudie's Library'. They owe their peculiar grimness to the fact that the people who suffer most are capable of making their suffering part of a reasoned view of life. The thought endures when the feeling has gone. Their unhappiness represents something more lasting than a personal reverse; it becomes part of a view of life. Hence when we have finished one of Gissing's novels we have taken away not a character, nor an incident, but the comment of a thoughtful man upon life as life seemed to him.

But because Gissing was always thinking, he was always changing. In that lies much of his interest for us. As a young man he had thought that he would write books to show up the 'hideous injustice of our whole system of society'. Later his views changed; either the task was impossible, or other tastes were tugging him in a different direction. He came to think, as he believed finally, that 'the only thing known to us of absolute value is artistic perfection . . . the works of the artist . . . remain sources of health to the world'. So that if one wishes to better the world one must, paradoxically enough, withdraw and spend more and more time fashioning one's sentences to perfection in solitude. Writing, Gissing thought, is a task of the utmost difficulty; perhaps at the end of his life he might be able 'to manage a page that is decently grammatical and fairly harmonious'. There are moments when he succeeded splendidly. For example, he is describing a cemetery in the East End of London:

Here on the waste limits of that dread east, to wander among tombs is to go hand-in-hand with the stark and eyeless emblems of mortality; the spirit fails beneath the cold burden of ignoble destiny. Here lie those who were born for toil; who, when toil has worn them to the uttermost, have but to yield their useless breath and pass into oblivion. For them is no day, only the brief twilight of a winter's sky between the former and the latter night. For them no aspiration; for them no hope of memory in the dust; their very children are wearied into forgetfulness. Indistinguishable units in the vast throng that labours but to support life, the name of each, father, mother,

child, is but a dumb cry for the warmth and love of which fate so stinted them. The wind wails above their narrow tenements; the sandy soil, soaking in the rain as soon as it has fallen, is a symbol of the great world which absorbs their toil and straight way blots their being.

Again and again such passages of description stand out like stone slabs, shaped and solid, among the untidy litter with which the pages of fiction are strewn.

Gissing, indeed, never ceased to educate himself. While the Baker Street trains hissed their steam under his window, and the lodger downstairs blew his room out, and the landlady was insolent, and the grocer refused to send the sugar so that he had to fetch it himself, and the fog burnt his throat and he caught cold and never spoke to anybody for three weeks, yet must drive his pen through page after page and vacillated miserably from one domestic disaster to another · while all this went on with a dreary monotony, for which he could only blame the weakness of his own character, the columns of the Parthenon, the hills of Rome still rose above the fogs and the fried-fish shops of the Euston Road. He was determined to visit Greece and Rome. He actually set foot in Athens; he saw Rome; he read his Thucydides in Sicily before he died. Life was changing round him; his comment upon life was changing too. Perhaps the old sordidity, the fog and the paraffin, and the drunken landlady, was not the only reality; ugliness is not the whole truth; there is an element of beauty in the world. The past, with its literature and its civilization, solidifies the present. At any rate his books in future were to be about Rome in the time of Totila, not about Islington in the time of Queen Victoria. He was reaching some point in his perpetual thinking where 'one has to distinguish between two forms of intelligence'; one cannot venerate the intellect only. But before he could mark down the spot he had reached on the map of thought, he, who had shared so many of his characters' experiences, shared, too, the death he had given to Edwin Reardon. 'Patience, patience', he said to the friend who stood by him as he died—an imperfect novelist, but a highly educated man.

Joseph Conrad¹

SUDDENLY, without giving us time to arrange our thoughts or prepare our phrases, our guest has left us; and his withdrawal without farewell or ceremony is in keeping with his mysterious arrival, long years ago, to take up his lodging in this country. For there was always an air of mystery about him. It was partly his Polish birth, partly his memorable appearance, partly his preference for living in the depths of the country, out of earshot of gossips, beyond reach of hostesses so that for news of him one had to depend upon the evidence of simple visitors with a habit of ringing door-bells who reported of their unknown host that he had the most perfect manners, the brightest eyes, and spoke English with a strong foreign accent.

Still, though it is the habit of death to quicken and focus our memories, there clings to the genius of Conrad something essentially, and not accidentally, difficult of approach. His reputation of later years was, with one obvious exception, undoubtedly the highest in England; yet he was not popular. He was read with passionate delight by some; others he left cold and lustreless. Among his readers were people of the most opposite ages and sympathies. Schoolboys of fourteen, driving their way through Marryat, Scott, Henty, and Dickens, swallowed him down with the rest; while the seasoned and the fastidious, who in process of time have eaten their way to the heart of literature and there turn over and over a few precious crumbs, set Conrad scrupulously upon their banqueting table. One source of difficulty and disagreement is, of course, to be found where men have at all times found it, in his beauty. One opens his pages and feels as Helen must have felt when she looked in her glass and realized that, do what she would, she could never in any circumstances pass for a plain woman. So Conrad had been gifted, so he had schooled himself, and such was his obligation to a strange language wooed characteristically for its Latin qualities rather than its Saxon that it seemed impossible for him to make an ugly or insignificant

¹August, 1924

movement of the pen. His mistress, his style, is a little somnolent sometimes in repose. But let somebody speak to her, and then how magnificently she bears down upon us, with what colour, triumph, and majesty! Yet it is arguable that Conrad would have gained both in credit and popularity if he had written what he had to write without this incessant care for appearances. They block and impede and distract, his critics say, pointing to those famous passages which it is becoming the habit to lift from their context and exhibit among other cut flowers of English prose. He was self-conscious and stiff and ornate, they complain, and the sound of his own voice was dearer to him than the voice of humanity in its anguish. The criticism is familiar, and as difficult to refute as the remarks of deaf people when *Figaro* is played. They see the orchestra; far off they hear a dismal scrape of sound; their own remarks are interrupted, and, very naturally, they conclude that the ends of life would be better served if instead of scraping Mozart those fifty fiddlers broke stones upon the road. That beauty teaches, that beauty is a disciplinarian, how are we to convince them, since her teaching is inseparable from the sound of her voice and to that they are deaf? But read Conrad, not in birthday books but in the bulk, and he must be lost indeed to the meaning of words who does not hear in that rather stiff and sombre music, with its reserve, its pride, its vast and implacable integrity, how it is better to be good than bad, how loyalty is good and honesty and courage, though ostensibly Conrad is concerned merely to show us the beauty of a night at sea. But it is ill work dragging such intimations from their element. Dried in our little saucers, without the magic and mystery of language, they lose their power to excite and goad; they lose the drastic power which is a constant quality of Conrad's prose.

For it was by virtue of something drastic in him, the qualities of a leader and captain, that Conrad kept his hold over boys and young people. Until *Nostromo* was written his characters, as the young were quick to perceive, were fundamentally simple and heroic, however subtle the mind and indirect the method of their creator. They were seafarers, used to solitude and silence. They were in conflict with Nature, but at peace with man. Nature was their antagonist, she it was who drew forth honour, magnanimity, loyalty, the qualities proper to man; she who in sheltered bays reared to womanhood beautiful girls unfathomable and austere. Above all, it was Nature

who turned out such gnarled and tested characters as Captain Whalley and old Singleton, obscure but glorious in their obscurity, who were to Conrad the pick of our race, the men whose praises he was never tired of celebrating:

They had been strong as those are strong who know neither doubts nor hopes. They had been impatient and enduring, turbulent and devoted, unruly and faithful. Well-meaning people had tried to represent these men as whining over every mouthful of their food, as going about their work in fear of their lives. But in truth they had been men who knew toil, privation, violence, debauchery—but knew not fear, and had no desire of spite in their hearts. Men hard to manage, but easy to inspire; voiceless men—but men enough to scorn in their hearts the sentimental voices that bewailed the hardness of their fate. It was a fate unique and their own; the capacity to bear it appeared to them the privilege of the chosen! Their generation lived inarticulate and indispensable, without knowing the sweetness of affections or the refuge of a home—and died free from the dark menace of a narrow grave. They were the everlasting children of the mysterious sea.

Such were the characters of the early books—*Lord Jim*, *Typhoon*, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, *Youth*, and these books, in spite of the changes and fashions, are surely secure of their place among our classics. But they reach this height by means of qualities which the simple story of adventure, as Marryat told it, or Fenimore Cooper, has no claim to possess. For it is clear that to admire and celebrate such men and such deeds, romantically, whole-heartedly and with the fervour of a lover, one must be possessed of the double vision; one must be at once inside and out. To praise their silence one must possess a voice. To appreciate their endurance one must be sensitive to fatigue. One must be able to live on equal terms with the Whalleys and the Singletons and yet hide from their suspicious eyes the very qualities which enable one to understand them. Conrad alone was able to live that double life, for Conrad was compound of two men; together with the sea captain dwelt that subtle, refined, and fastidious analyst whom he called Marlow. 'A most discreet, understanding man', he said of Marlow.

Marlow was one of those born observers who are happiest in retirement. Marlow liked nothing better than to sit on deck, in some obscure creek of the Thames, smoking and recollecting; smoking

and speculating; sending after his smoke beautiful rings of words until all the summer's night became a little clouded with tobacco smoke. Marlow, too, had a profound respect for the men with whom he had sailed; but he saw the humour of them. He nosed out and described in masterly fashion those livid creatures who prey successfully upon the clumsy veterans. He had a flair for human deformity; his humour was sardonic. Nor did Marlow live entirely wreathed in the smoke of his own cigars. He had a habit of opening his eyes suddenly and looking—at a rubbish heap, at a port, at a shop counter—and then complete in its burning ring of light that thing is flashed bright upon the mysterious background. Introspective and analytical, Marlow was aware of this peculiarity. He said the power came to him suddenly. He might, for instance, overhear a French officer murmur 'Mon Dieu, how the time passes!'

Nothing [he comments] could have been more commonplace than this remark; but its utterance coincided for me with a moment of vision. It's extraordinary how we go through life with eyes half shut, with dull ears, with dormant thoughts. . . . Nevertheless, there can be but few of us who had never known one of these rare moments of awakening, when we see, hear, understand, ever so much—everything—in a flash, before we fall back again into our agreeable somnolence. I raised my eyes when he spoke, and I saw him as though I had never seen him before.

Picture after picture he painted thus upon the dark background; ships first and foremost, ships at anchor, ships flying before the storm, ships in harbour; he painted sunsets and dawns; he painted the night; he painted the sea in every aspect; he painted the gaudy brilliance of Eastern ports, and men and women, their houses and their attitudes. He was an accurate and unflinching observer, schooled to that 'absolute loyalty towards his feelings and sensations', which, Conrad wrote, 'an author should keep hold of in his most exalted moments of creation'. And very quietly and compassionately Marlow sometimes lets fall a few words of epitaph which remind us, with all that beauty and brilliancy before our eyes, of the darkness of the background.

Thus a rough-and-ready distinction would make us say that it is Marlow who comments, Conrad who creates. It would lead us,

aware that we are on dangerous ground, to account for that change which, Conrad tells us, took place when he had finished the last story in the *Typhoon* volume—'a subtle change in the nature of the inspiration'—by some alteration in the relationship of the two old friends. ' . . . it seemed somehow that there was nothing more in the world to write about.' It was Conrad, let us suppose, Conrad the creator, who said that, looking back with sorrowful satisfaction upon the stories he had told; feeling as he well might that he could never better the storm in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, or render more faithful tribute to the qualities of British seamen than he had done already in *Youth* and *Lord Jim*. It was then that Marlow, the commentator, reminded him how, in the course of nature, one must grow old, sit smoking on deck, and give up seafaring. But, he reminded him, those strenuous years had deposited their memories; and he even went so far perhaps as to hint that, though the last word might have been said about Captain Whalley and his relation to the universe, there remained on shore a number of men and women whose relationships, though of a more personal kind, might be worth looking into. If we further suppose that there was a volume of Henry James on board and that Marlow gave his friend the book to take to bed with him, we may seek support in the fact that it was in 1905 that Conrad wrote a very fine essay upon that master.

For some years, then, it was Marlow who was the dominant partner. *Nostromo*, *Chance*, *The Arrow of Gold* represent that stage of the alliance which some will continue to find the richest of all. The human heart is more intricate than the forest, they will say; it has its storms; it has its creatures of the night; and if as novelist you wish to test man in all his relationships, the proper antagonist is man; his ordeal is in society, not solitude. For them there will always be a peculiar fascination in the books where the light of those brilliant eyes falls not only upon the waste of waters but upon the heart in its perplexity. But it must be admitted that, if Marlow thus advised Conrad to shift his angle of vision, the advice was bold. For the vision of a novelist is both complex and specialized; complex, because behind his characters and apart from them must stand something stable to which he relates them; specialized because since he is a single person with one sensibility the aspects of life in which he can believe with con-

viction are strictly limited. So delicate a balance is easily disturbed. After the middle period Conrad never again was able to bring his figures into perfect relation with their background. He never believed in his later and more highly sophisticated characters as he had believed in his early seamen. When he had to indicate their relation to that other unseen world of novelists, the world of values and convictions, he was far less sure what those values were. Then, over and over again, a single phrase, 'He steered with care', coming at the end of a storm, carried in it a whole morality. But in this more crowded and complicated world such terse phrases became less and less appropriate. Complex men and women of many interests and relations would not submit to so summary a judgement; or, if they did, much that was important in them escaped the verdict. And yet it was very necessary to Conrad's genius, with its luxuriant and romantic power, to have some law by which its creations could be tried. Essentially—such remained his creed—this world of civilized and self-conscious people is based upon 'a few very simple ideas'; but where, in the world of thoughts and personal relations, are we to find them? There are no masts in drawing-rooms; the typhoon does not test the worth of politicians and business-men. Seeking and not finding such supports, the world of Conrad's later period has about it an involuntary obscurity, an inconclusiveness, almost a disillusionment which baffles and fatigues. We lay hold in the dusk only of the old nobilities and sonorities: fidelity, compassion, honour, service—beautiful always, but now a little wearily reiterated, as if times had changed. Perhaps it was Marlow who was at fault. His habit of mind was a trifle sedentary. He had sat upon the deck too long; splendid in soliloquy, he was less apt in the give and take of conversation; and those 'moments of vision' flashing and fading, do not serve as well as steady lamplight to illumine the ripple of life and its long, gradual years. Above all, perhaps, he did not take into account how, if Conrad was to create, it was essential first that he should believe.

Therefore, though we shall make expeditions into the later books and bring back wonderful trophies, large tracts of them will remain by most of us untrodden. It is the earlier books—*Youth*, *Lord Jim*, *Typhoon*, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*—that we shall read in their entirety. For when the question is asked, what of Conrad

COLLECTED ESSAYS

will survive and where in the ranks of novelists we are to place him, these books, with their air of telling us something very old and perfectly true, which had lain hidden but is now revealed, will come to mind and make such questions and comparisons seem a little futile. Complete and still, very chaste and very beautiful, they rise in the memory as, on these hot summer nights, in their slow and stately way first one star comes out and then another.

Mr. Conrad: A Conversation¹

THE Otways, perhaps, inherited their love of reading from the ancient dramatist whose name they share, whether they descend from him (as they like to think) or not. Penelope, the oldest unmarried daughter, a small dark woman turned forty, her complexion a little roughened by country life, her eyes brown and bright, yet subject to strange long stares of meditation or vacancy, had always, since the age of seven, been engaged in reading the classics. Her father's library, though strong chiefly in the literature of the East, had its Popes, its Drydens, its Shakespeares, in various stages of splendour and decay; and if his daughters chose to amuse themselves by reading what they liked, certainly it was a method of education which, since it spared his purse, deserved his benediction.

That education it could be called, no one nowadays would admit. All that can be said in its favour was that Penelope Otway was never dull, gallantly ambitious of surmounting small hillocks of learning, and of an enthusiasm which greater knowledge might perhaps have stinted or have diverted less fortunately into the creation of books of her own. As it was, she was content to read and to talk, reading in the intervals of household business, and talking when she could find company, on Sundays for the most part, when visitors came down, and sat on fine summer days under the splendid yew tree on the lawn.

On this occasion, a hot morning in August, her old friend David Lowe was distressed, but hardly surprised, to find five magnificent volumes lying on the grass by her chair, while Penelope acknowledged his presence by putting her fingers between the pages of a sixth and looking at the sky.

'Joseph Conrad,' he said, lifting the admirable books—solid, stately, good-looking, yet meant for a long lifetime of repeated re-reading—on to his knee. 'So I see you have made up your mind. Mr. Conrad is a classic.'

'Not in your opinion,' she replied; 'I remember the bitter letters you wrote me when you read *The Arrow of Gold* and *The*

¹ Written in 1923

Rescue. You compared him to an elderly and disillusioned nightingale singing over and over, but hopelessly out of tune, the one song he had learned in his youth.'

'I had forgotten,' said David, 'but it is true. The books puzzled me after those early novels, *Youth*, *Lord Jim*, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, which we thought so magnificent. I said to myself perhaps it is because he is a foreigner. He can understand us perfectly when we talk slowly, but not when we are excited or when we are at our ease. There is nothing colloquial in Conrad; nothing intimate; and no humour, at least of the English kind. And those are great drawbacks for a novelist, you will admit. Then, of course, it goes without saying that he is a romantic. No one objects to that. But it entails a terrible penalty—death at the age of forty—death or disillusionment. If your romantic persists in living, he must face his disillusionment. He must make his music out of contrasts. But Conrad has never faced his disillusionment. He goes on singing the same songs about sea captains and the sea, beautiful, noble, and monotonous; but now I think with a crack in the flawless strain of his youth. It is a mind of one fact; and such a mind can never be among the classics.'

'But he is a great writer! A great writer!' cried Penelope, gripping the arms of her chair. 'How shall I prove it to you? Admit, in the first place, that your views are partial. You have skipped; you have sipped; you have tasted. From *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* you have leapt to *The Arrow of Gold*. Your gimcrack theory is a confection of cobwebs spun while you shave, chiefly with a view to saving yourself the trouble of investigating and possibly admiring the work of a living writer in your own tongue. You are a surly watchdog; but Conrad you will have to admit.'

'My ears are pricked,' said David; 'explain your theory.'

'My theory is made of cobwebs, no doubt, like your own. But of this I am certain. Conrad is not one and simple; no, he is many and complex. That is a common case among modern writers, as we have often agreed. And it is when they bring these selves into relation—when they simplify, when they reconcile their opposites—that they bring off (generally late in life) those complete books which for that reason we call their masterpieces. And Mr. Conrad's selves are particularly opposite. He is composed of two people who have nothing whatever in common. He is your sea

captain, simple, faithful, obscure; and he is Marlow, subtle, psychological, loquacious. In the early books the Captain dominates; in the later it is Marlow at least who does all the talking. The union of these two very different men makes for all sorts of queer effects. You must have noticed the sudden silences, the awkward collisions, the immense lethargy which threatens at every moment to descend. All this, I think, must be the result of that internal conflict. For while Marlow would like to track every motive, explore every shadow, his companion the sea captain is for ever at his elbow saying ". . . the world, the temporal world, rests on a very few simple ideas; so simple that they must be as old as the hills." Then again, Marlow is a man of words; they are all dear to him, appealing, seductive. But the sea captain cuts him short. "The gift of words", he says, "is no great matter". And it is the sea captain who triumphs. In Conrad's novels personal relations are never final. Men are tested by their attitude to august abstractions. Are they faithful, are they honourable, are they courageous? The men he loves are reserved for death in the bosom of the sea. Their elegy is Milton's "Nothing is here to wail . . . nothing but what may quiet us in a death so noble"—an elegy which you could never possibly speak over the body of any of Henry James's characters, whose intimacies have been personal with each other.'

'Pardon me,' said David, 'an apparent rudeness. Your theory may be a good one, but the moment you quote Conrad himself theories turn to moonshine. Unfortunate art of criticism, which only shines in the absence of the sun! I had forgotten the spell of Conrad's prose. It must be of extraordinary strength, since the few words you have quoted rouse in me an overpowering hunger for more.' He opened *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* and read: 'On men reprieved by its disdainful mercy the immortal sea confers in its justice the full privilege of desired unrest. . . .' 'The men turned in wet and turned out stiff to face the redeeming and ruthless exactions of their obscure fate.' 'It is not fair,' he said, 'to quote such scraps, but even from them I get an extreme satisfaction.'

'Yes,' said Penelope, 'they're fine in the grand deliberate manner which has in it the seeds of pomposity and monotony. But I almost prefer his sudden direct pounce right across the room like a cat on a mouse. There's Mrs. Schomberg, for instance,

"a scraggy little woman with long ringlets and a blue tooth", or a dying man's voice "like the rustle of a single dry leaf driven along the smooth sand of a beach". He sees once and he sees for ever. His books are full of moments of vision. They light up a whole character in a flash. Perhaps I prefer Marlow the instinctive to Captain Whalley the moralist. But the peculiar beauty is the product of the two together. The beauty of surface has always a fibre of morality within. I seem to see each of the sentences you have read advancing with resolute bearing and a calm which they have won in strenuous conflict, against the forces of falsehood, sentimentality, and slovenliness. He could not write badly, one feels, to save his life. He has his duty to letters as sailors have theirs to their ships. And indeed he praises those inveterate landlubbers, Henry James and Anatole France, as though they were bluff sea dogs who had brought their books to port without compasses in a gale of wind.'

'Certainly he was a strange apparition to descend upon these shores in the last part of the nineteenth century—an artist, an aristocrat, a Pole,' said David. 'For after all these years I cannot think of him as an English writer. He is too formal, too courteous, too scrupulous in the use of a language which is not his own. Then of course he is an aristocrat to the backbone. His humour is aristocratic—ironic, sardonic, never broad and free like the common English humour which descends from Falstaff. He is infinitely reserved. And the lack of intimacy which I complain of may perhaps be due, not merely to those "august abstractions" as you call them, but to the fact that there are no women in his books.'

'There are the ships, the beautiful ships,' said Penelope. 'They are more feminine than his women, who are either mountains of marble or the dreams of a charming boy over the photograph of an actress. But surely a great novel can be made out of a man and a ship, a man and a storm, a man and death and dishonour?'

'Ah, we are back at the question of greatness,' said David. 'Which, then, is the great book, where, as you say, the complex vision becomes simple, and Marlow and the sea captain combine to produce a world at once exquisitely subtle, psychologically profound, yet based upon a very few simple ideas "so simple that they must be as old as the hills"?'

MR. CONRAD: A CONVERSATION

'I have just read *Chance*,' said Penelope. 'It is a great book, I think. But now you will have to read it yourself, for you are not going to accept my word, especially when it is a word which I cannot define. It is a great book, a great book,' she repeated.

Walter Raleigh

ON a certain Wednesday in March, 1889, Walter Raleigh, then aged twenty-eight, gave his first lecture upon English literature in Manchester. It was not his first lecture by any means, for he had already lectured the natives of India on the same subject for two years. After Manchester came Liverpool; after Liverpool, Glasgow; after Glasgow, Oxford. At all these places he lectured incessantly upon English literature. Once he lectured three times a day. He became, indeed, such an adept at the art of lecturing that towards the end 'sometimes he would prepare what he had to say in his half-hour's walk from his home at Ferry Hinksey'. People who heard him said that his lectures stimulated them, opened their eyes, made them think for themselves. '“Raleigh's not always at his best, but when he's good nobody can touch him” --that was the general verdict.' Nevertheless, in the course of two large volumes filled with delightful and often brilliant letters it would be difficult to find a single remark of any interest whatsoever about English literature.

There is necessarily a great deal of talk about the profession of teaching literature, and the profession of writing literary textbooks, of 'doing Chaucer in six chapters and Wordsworth, better known as Daddy, also in six chapters'. But when one looks for the unprofessional talk, the talk which is talked among friends when business hours are over, one is bewildered and disappointed. Is this all that the Professor of English literature has to say? 'Scott to-morrow—not a poet I think but fine old man. Good old Scott.' 'The weak point in William [Blake] is not his Reason, which is A.1, but his imagination. . . . Wonderful things the inspired old bustard said from time to time in conversation.' 'As for old Bill Wordsworth he is the same old stick-in-the-mud as ever. . . . He gets praised chiefly for his celebrated imitation of Shakespeare (which is really very good) and for his admirable reproduction of a bleat. But he has a turn of his own, if only he would do it and be damned to him.' Any clever man at a dinner party anxious to scare the rowing blue or the city magnate who happens to be within earshot would have talked about books exactly as Raleigh

wrote about them at his leisure. There is nothing to suggest that literature was a matter of profound interest to him when he was not lecturing about it. When we read the letters of Keats, the diary of the Goncourts, the letters of Lamb, the casual remarks of that unfashionable poet Tennyson, we feel that, waking or sleeping, these men never stopped thinking about literature. It is kneaded into the stuff of their brains. Their fingers are dyed in it. Whatever they touch is stained with it. Whatever they are doing their minds fill up involuntarily with some aspect of the absorbing question. Nor does it seem to have occurred to them to wonder what the rowing blue will think of them for talking seriously about books. 'I think poetry should surprise by a fine excess and not by singularity; it should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts and appear almost a remembrance', wrote Keats, and there is not a damn in the sentence. But the Professor of English literature could scarcely open his lips without dropping into slang; he could never mention Bill Blake or Bill Shakespeare or old Bill Wordsworth without seeming to apologize for bringing books into the talk at all. Yet there is no doubt, Walter Raleigh was one of the best Professors of Literature of our time; he did brilliantly whatever it is that Professors are supposed to do. How then shall we compose the difference—solve the discrepancy?

In the first place the Professor of English literature is not there to teach people how to write; he is there to teach them how to read. Moreover, those people include city magnates, politicians, schoolmistresses, soldiers, scientists, mothers of families, country clergymen in embryo. Many of them have never opened a book before. Many will seldom get a chance of opening a book again. They have to be taught—but what? Raleigh himself had no doubts on this point. His business was 'only to get people to love the poets'. 'To make people old or young', he wrote, 'care for say the principal English poets as much or half as much as I do—that would, I am vain enough to think, be something—if it can be done.' He obstinately refused to stuff his pupils with facts. 'The facts, it is true, tell in examinations. But you will none of you be any nearer Heaven ten years hence for having taken a B.A. degree, while for a love and understanding of Keats you may raise yourself several inches.' He had himself spent no time scraping away the moss, repairing the broken noses on the fabric of English

literature; and he did not press that pursuit upon his pupils. He talked his lectures almost out of his head. He joked, he told stories. He made undergraduates rock with laughter. He drew them in crowds to his lecture room. And they went away loving something or other. Perhaps it was Keats. Perhaps it was the British Empire. Certainly it was Walter Raleigh. But we should be much surprised if anybody went away loving poetry, loving the art of letters.

Nor is it difficult to find the reason. It is written large over Walter Raleigh's books—the *English Novel*, *Style*, *Shakespeare* and the rest. They have every virtue; they are readable, just, acute, stimulating, and packed with information; they are as firm in style and hard in substance as a macadamised road. But the man who wrote them had no generous measure of the gifts of a writer. The maker of these rather tight, highly academic books had never been outside the critical fence. No novel, no poem, no play had ever lured him away from his prefaces, his summings-up, his surveys. The excitement, the adventure, the turmoil of creation were unknown to him. But the critic who makes us love poetry is always sufficiently gifted to have had experiences of his own. He feels his way along a line spun by his own failures and successes. He may stumble; he may stammer; he may be incapable of orderly survey. But it is the Keats, the Coleridge, the Lamb, the Flaubert who get to the heart of the matter. It is in the toil and strife of writing that they have forced the door open and gone within and told us what they have seen there. When Walter Raleigh held a pen in his hand it behaved with the utmost propriety. He never wrote a bad sentence; but he never wrote a sentence which broke down barriers. He never pressed on over the ruins of his own culture to the discovery of something better. He remained trim and detached on the high road, a perfect example of the Professor of Literature who has no influence whatever upon the art of writing. Soon, therefore, for he was by temperament highly adventurous, he began to find literature a little dull. He began to separate literature from life. He began to cry out upon 'culture' and 'culture bugs'. He began to despise critics and criticism. 'I can't help feeling that critical admiration for what another man has written is an emotion for spinsters', he wrote. He really believed, he said, 'not in refinement and scholarly eleg-

ance, those are only a game; but in blood feuds, and the chase of wild beasts and marriage by capture'. In short, being incapable of humbug, a man of entire sincerity and great vitality, Walter Raleigh ceased to profess literature and became instead a Professor of Life.

There is ample evidence in the letters alone that he had a remarkable aptitude for this branch of learning. He seems never to have been bored, never to have been doubtful, never to have been sentimental. He laid hold on things with enviable directness. The whole force of his being seems to have played spontaneously upon whatever he wished and yet to have been controlled by an unerring sense that some things matter and some things do not. His equilibrium was perfect. Whether he was set down in India or Oxford, among the simple or the learned, the aristocrats or the Dons, he found his balance at once and got the utmost out of the situation. It is easy to imagine the race and flash of his talk, and what fine unexpected things he said, and what pinnacles of fun he raised and how for all his extravagance and irresponsibility the world that his wit lit up was held steady by his fundamental sanity and good sense. He was the most enchanting of companions—upon that all are agreed.

But the difficulty remained. Once make the fatal distinction between life and letters, once exalt life and find literature an occupation for old maids, and inevitably, if one is Walter Raleigh, one becomes discontented with mere praise. Professors must talk; but the lover of life must live. Unfortunately life in the sense of 'blood feuds and the chase of wild beasts, and marriage by capture' was hard to come by in the last years of the nineteenth century. Queen Victoria was on the throne, Lord Salisbury was in power, and the British Empire was growing daily more robust. A breath of fresh air blew in with the Boer War. Raleigh hailed it with a shout of relief '... the British officer (and man) restores one's joy in the race', he said. He was coming to feel that there is some close connexion between writing and fighting, that in an age like his when the fighter did not write and the writer did not fight the divorce was unfortunate—especially for literature. 'Were it not better to seek training on a battlefield, and use the first words one learns at mess?' he asked. All his sympathies were tending towards action. He was growing more and more tired of

culture and criticism, more definitely of opinion that the 'learned critic is a beast', that 'education has taken the fine bloom off the writing of books', less and less attracted by writing at all, until finally, in 1913, he bursts out that he 'can't read Shakespeare any more. . . . Not that I think him a bad author, particularly', he adds, 'but I can't bear literature.' When the guns fired in August 1914, no one saluted them more rapturously than the Professor of English Literature at Oxford. 'The air is better to breathe than it has been for years', he exclaimed. 'I'm glad I lived to see it, and sick that I'm not in it.'

It seemed indeed as if his chance of life had come too late. He still seemed fated to praise fighting but not to fight, to lecture about life but not to live. He did what a man of his age could do. He drilled. He marched. He wrote pamphlets. He lectured more frequently than ever; he practically ceased to read. At length he was made historian of the Air Force. To his infinite satisfaction he consorted with soldiers. To his immense delight he flew to Baghdad. He died within a week or two after his return. But what did that matter? The Professor of English Literature had lived at last.

Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown¹

IT seems to me possible, perhaps desirable, that I may be the only person in this room who has committed the folly of writing, trying to write, or failing to write, a novel. And when I asked myself, as your invitation to speak to you about modern fiction made me ask myself, what demon whispered in my ear and urged me to my doom, a little figure rose before me— the figure of a man, or of a woman, who said, 'My name is Brown. Catch me if you can.'

Most novelists have the same experience. Some Brown, Smith, or Jones comes before them and says in the most seductive and charming way in the world, 'Come and catch me if you can.' And so, led on by this will-o'-the-wisp, they flounder through volume after volume, spending the best years of their lives in the pursuit, and receiving for the most part very little cash in exchange. Few catch the phantom; most have to be content with a scrap of her dress or a wisp of her hair.

My belief that men and women write novels because they are lured on to create some character which has thus imposed itself upon them has the sanction of Mr. Arnold Bennett. In an article from which I will quote he says, 'The foundation of good fiction is character-creating and nothing else. . . . Style counts; plot counts; originality of outlook counts. But none of these counts anything like so much as the convincingness of the characters. If the characters are real the novel will have a chance; if they are not, oblivion will be its portion. . . .' And he goes on to draw the conclusion that we have no young novelists of first-rate importance at the present moment, because they are unable to create characters that are real, true, and convincing.

These are the questions that I want with greater boldness than discretion to discuss tonight. I want to make out what we mean when we talk about 'character' in fiction; to say something about the question of reality which Mr. Bennett raises; and to suggest some reasons why the younger novelists fail to create characters, if, as Mr. Bennett asserts, it is true that fail they do. This will lead

¹A paper read to the Heretics, Cambridge, on May 18th, 1924

me, I am well aware, to make some very sweeping and some very vague assertions. For the question is an extremely difficult one. Think how little we know about character—think how little we know about art. But, to make a clearance before I begin, I will suggest that we range Edwardians and Georgians into two camps; Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Galsworthy I will call the Edwardians; Mr. Forster, Mr. Lawrence, Mr. Strachey, Mr. Joyce, and Mr. Eliot I will call the Georgians. And if I speak in the first person, with intolerable egotism, I will ask you to excuse me. I do not want to attribute to the world at large the opinions of one solitary, ill-informed, and misguided individual.

My first assertion is one that I think you will grant—that everyone in this room is a judge of character. Indeed it would be impossible to live for a year without disaster unless one practised character-reading and had some skill in the art. Our marriages, our friendships depend on it; our business largely depends on it; every day questions arise which can only be solved by its help. And now I will hazard a second assertion, which is more disputable perhaps, to the effect that in or about December, 1910, human character changed.

I am not saying that one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered, or that a hen had laid an egg. The change was not sudden and definite like that. But a change there was, nevertheless; and, since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910. The first signs of it are recorded in the books of Samuel Butler, in *The Way of All Flesh* in particular; the plays of Bernard Shaw continue to record it. In life one can see the change, if I may use a homely illustration, in the character of one's cook. The Victorian cook lived like a leviathan in the lower depths, formidable, silent, obscure, inscrutable; the Georgian cook is a creature of sunshine and fresh air; in and out of the drawing-room, now to borrow the *Daily Herald*, now to ask advice about a hat. Do you ask for more solemn instances of the power of the human race to change? Read the *Agamemnon*, and see whether, in process of time, your sympathies are not almost entirely with Clytemnestra. Or consider the married life of the Carlyles and bewail the waste, the futility, for him and for her, of the horrible domestic tradition which made it seemly for a woman of genius to spend her time chasing beetles, scouring sauce-

pans, instead of writing books. All human relations have shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature. Let us agree to place one of these changes about the year 1910.

I have said that people have to acquire a good deal of skill in character-reading if they are to live a single year of life without disaster. But it is the art of the young. In middle age and in old age the art is practised mostly for its uses, and friendships and other adventures and experiments in the art of reading character are seldom made. But novelists differ from the rest of the world because they do not cease to be interested in character when they have learnt enough about it for practical purposes. They go a step further, they feel that there is something permanently interesting in character in itself. When all the practical business of life has been discharged, there is something about people which continues to seem to them of overwhelming importance, in spite of the fact that it has no bearing whatever upon their happiness, comfort, or income. The study of character becomes to them an absorbing pursuit; to impart character an obsession. And this I find it very difficult to explain: what novelists mean when they talk about character, what the impulse is that urges them so powerfully every now and then to embody their view in writing.

So, if you will allow me, instead of analysing and abstracting, I will tell you a simple story which, however pointless, has the merit of being true, of a journey from Richmond to Waterloo, in the hope that I may show you what I mean by character in itself; that you may realize the different aspects it can wear; and the hideous perils that beset you directly you try to describe it in words.

One night some weeks ago, then, I was late for the train and jumped into the first carriage I came to. As I sat down I had the strange and uncomfortable feeling that I was interrupting a conversation between two people who were already sitting there. Not that they were young or happy. Far from it. They were both elderly, the woman over sixty, the man well over forty. They were sitting opposite each other, and the man, who had been leaning over and talking emphatically to judge by his attitude and the flush on his face, sat back and became silent. I had disturbed him, and he was annoyed. The elderly lady, however, whom I will call

Mrs. Brown, seemed rather relieved. She was one of those clean, threadbare old ladies whose extreme tidiness—everything buttoned, fastened, tied together, mended and brushed up—suggests more extreme poverty than rags and dirt. There was something pinched about her—a look of suffering, of apprehension, and, in addition, she was extremely small. Her feet, in their clean little boots, scarcely touched the floor. I felt she had nobody to support her; that she had to make up her mind for herself; that, having been deserted, or left a widow, years ago, she had led an anxious, harried life, bringing up an only son, perhaps, who, as likely as not, was by this time beginning to go to the bad. All this shot through my mind as I sat down, being uncomfortable, like most people, at travelling with fellow passengers unless I have somehow or other accounted for them. Then I looked at the man. He was no relation of Mrs. Brown's I felt sure; he was of a bigger, burlier, less refined type. He was a man of business I imagined, very likely a respectable corn-chandler from the North, dressed in good blue serge with a pocket-knife and a silk handkerchief, and a stout leather bag. Obviously, however, he had an unpleasant business to settle with Mrs. Brown; a secret, perhaps sinister business, which they did not intend to discuss in my presence.

'Yes, the Crofts have had very bad luck with their servants,' Mr. Smith (as I will call him) said in a considering way, going back to some earlier topic, with a view to keeping up appearances.

'Ah, poor people,' said Mrs. Brown, a trifle condescendingly. 'My grandmother had a maid who came when she was fifteen and stayed till she was eighty' (this was said with a kind of hurt and aggressive pride to impress us both perhaps).

'One doesn't often come across that sort of thing nowadays,' said Mr. Smith in conciliatory tones.

Then they were silent.

'It's odd they don't start a golf club there—I should have thought one of the young fellows would,' said Mr. Smith, for the silence obviously made him uneasy.

Mrs. Brown hardly took the trouble to answer.

'What changes they're making in this part of the world,' said Mr. Smith looking out of the window, and looking furtively at me as he did so.

It was plain, from Mrs. Brown's silence, from the uneasy

affability with which Mr. Smith spoke, that he had some power over her which he was exerting disagreeably. It might have been her son's downfall, or some painful episode in her past life, or her daughter's. Perhaps she was going to London to sign some document to make over some property. Obviously against her will she was in Mr. Smith's hands. I was beginning to feel a great deal of pity for her, when she said, suddenly and inconsequently:

'Can you tell me if an oak-tree dies when the leaves have been eaten for two years in succession by caterpillars?'

She spoke quite brightly, and rather precisely, in a cultivated, inquisitive voice.

Mr. Smith was startled, but relieved to have a safe topic of conversation given him. He told her a great deal very quickly about plagues of insects. He told her that he had a brother who kept a fruit farm in Kent. He told her what fruit farmers do every year in Kent, and so on, and so on. While he talked a very odd thing happened. Mrs. Brown took out her little white handkerchief and began to dab her eyes. She was crying. But she went on listening quite composedly to what he was saying, and he went on talking, a little louder, a little angrily, as if he had seen her cry often before; as if it were a painful habit. At last it got on his nerves. He stopped abruptly, looked out of the window, then leant towards her as he had been doing when I got in, and said in a bullying, menacing way, as if he would not stand any more nonsense:

'So about that matter we were discussing. It'll be all right? George will be there on Tuesday?'

'We shan't be late,' said Mrs. Brown, gathering herself together with superb dignity.

Mr. Smith said nothing. He got up, buttoned his coat, reached his bag down, and jumped out of the train before it had stopped at Clapham Junction. He had got what he wanted, but he was ashamed of himself; he was glad to get out of the old lady's sight.

Mrs. Brown and I were left alone together. She sat in her corner opposite, very clean, very small, rather queer, and suffering intensely. The impression she made was overwhelming. It came pouring out like a draught, like a smell of burning. What was it composed of—that overwhelming and peculiar impression? Myriads of irrelevant and incongruous ideas crowd into one's head on such occasions; one sees the person, one sees Mrs. Brown,

in the centre of all sorts of different scenes. I thought of her in a seaside house, among queer ornaments: sea-urchins, models of ships in glass cases. Her husband's medals were on the mantel-piece. She popped in and out of the room, perching on the edges of chairs, picking meals out of saucers, indulging in long, silent stares. The caterpillars and the oak-trees seemed to imply all that. And then, into this fantastic and secluded life, in broke Mr. Smith. I saw him blowing in, so to speak on a windy day. He banged, he slammed. His dripping umbrella made a pool in the hall. They sat closeted together.

And then Mrs. Brown faced the dreadful revelation. She took her heroic decision. Early, before dawn, she packed her bag and carried it herself to the station. She would not let Smith touch it. She was wounded in her pride, unmoored from her anchorage; she came of gentles folks who kept servants—but details could wait. The important thing was to realize her character, to steep oneself in her atmosphere. I had no time to explain why I felt it somewhat tragic, heroic, yet with a dash of the flighty, and fantastic, before the train stopped, and I watched her disappear, carrying her bag, into the vast blazing station. She looked very small, very tenacious; at once very frail and very heroic. And I have never seen her again, and I shall never know what became of her.

The story ends without any point to it. But I have not told you this anecdote to illustrate either my own ingenuity or the pleasure of travelling from Richmond to Waterloo. What I want you to see in it is this. Here is a character imposing itself upon another person. Here is Mrs. Brown making someone begin almost automatically to write a novel about her. I believe that all novels begin with an old lady in the corner opposite. I believe that all novels, that is to say, deal with character, and that it is to express character—not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novels, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved. To express character, I have said; but you will at once reflect that the very widest interpretation can be put upon those words. For example, old Mrs. Brown's character will strike you very differently according to the age and country in which you happen to be born. It would be easy enough to write three different versions of that incident in the train, an English, a

French, and a Russian. The English writer would make the old lady into a 'character'; he would bring out her oddities and mannerisms; her buttons and wrinkles; her ribbons and warts. Her personality would dominate the book. A French writer would rub out all that; he would sacrifice the individual Mrs. Brown to give a more general view of human nature; to make a more abstract, proportioned, and harmonious whole. The Russian would pierce through the flesh; would reveal the soul—the soul alone, wandering out into the Waterloo Road, asking of life some tremendous question which would sound on and on in our ears after the book was finished. And then besides age and country there is the writer's temperament to be considered. You see one thing in character, and I another. You say it means this, and I that. And when it comes to writing, each makes a further selection on principles of his own. Thus Mrs. Brown can be treated in an infinite variety of ways, according to the age, country, and temperament of the writer.

But now I must recall what Mr. Arnold Bennett says. He says that it is only if the characters are real that the novel has any chance of surviving. Otherwise, die it must. But, I ask myself, what is reality? And who are the judges of reality? A character may be real to Mr. Bennett and quite unreal to me. For instance, in this article he says that Dr. Watson in *Sherlock Holmes* is real to him: to me Dr. Watson is a sack stuffed with straw, a dummy, a figure of fun. And so it is with character after character—in book after book. There is nothing that people differ about more than the reality of characters, especially in contemporary books. But if you take a larger view I think that Mr. Bennett is perfectly right. If, that is, you think of the novels which seem to you great novels—*War and Peace*, *Vanity Fair*, *Tristram Shandy*, *Madame Bovary*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Villette*—if you think of these books, you do at once think of some character who seemed to you so real (I do not by that mean so lifelike) that it has the power to make you think not merely of it itself, but of all sorts of things through its eyes—of religion, of love, of war, of peace, of family life, of balls in country towns, of sunsets, moonrises, the immortality of the soul. There is hardly any subject of human experience that is left out of *War and Peace* it seems to me. And in all these novels all these great novelists have brought us to see

whatever they wish us to see through some character. Otherwise, they would not be novelists; but poets, historians, or pamphleteers.

But now let us examine what Mr. Bennett went on to say—he said that there was no great novelist among the Georgian writers because they cannot create characters who are real, true, and convincing. And there I cannot agree. There are reasons, excuses, possibilities which I think put a different colour upon the case. It seems so to me at least, but I am well aware that this is a matter about which I am likely to be prejudiced, sanguine, and near-sighted. I will put my view before you in the hope that you will make it impartial, judicial, and broad-minded. Why, then, is it so hard for novelists at present to create characters which seem real, not only to Mr. Bennett, but to the world at large? Why, when October comes round, do the publishers always fail to supply us with a masterpiece?

Surely one reason is that the men and women who began writing novels in 1910 or thereabouts had this great difficulty to face—that there was no English novelist living from whom they could learn their business. Mr. Conrad is a Pole; which sets him apart, and makes him, however admirable, not very helpful. Mr. Hardy has written no novel since 1895. The most prominent and successful novelists in the year 1910 were, I suppose, Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Galsworthy. Now it seems to me that to go to these men and ask them to teach you how to write a novel—how to create characters that are real—is precisely like going to a bootmaker and asking him to teach you how to make a watch. Do not let me give you the impression that I do not admire and enjoy their books. They seem to me of great value, and indeed of great necessity. There are seasons when it is more important to have boots than to have watches. To drop metaphor, I think that after the creative activity of the Victorian age it was quite necessary, not only for literature but for life, that someone should write the books that Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennet, and Mr. Galsworthy have written. Yet what odd books they are! Sometimes I wonder if we are right to call them books at all. For they leave one with so strange a feeling of incompleteness and dissatisfaction. In order to complete them it seems necessary to do something—to join a society, or, more desperately, to write a cheque. That done, the restlessness is laid, the book finished; it can be put upon the shelf,

and need never be read again. But with the work of other novelists it is different. *Tristram Shandy* or *Pride and Prejudice* is complete in itself; it is self-contained; it leaves one with no desire to do anything, except indeed to read the book again, and to understand it better. The difference perhaps is that both Sterne and Jane Austen were interested in things in themselves; in character in itself; in the book in itself. Therefore everything was inside the book, nothing outside. But the Edwardians were never interested in character in itself; or in the book in itself. They were interested in something outside. Their books, then, were incomplete as books, and required that the reader should finish them, actively and practically, for himself.

Perhaps we can make this clearer if we take the liberty of imagining a little party in the railway carriage— Mr. Wells, Mr. Galsworthy, Mr. Bennett are travelling to Waterloo with Mrs. Brown. Mrs. Brown, I have said, was poorly dressed and very small. She had an anxious, harassed look. I doubt whether she was what you call an educated woman. Seizing upon all these symptoms of the unsatisfactory condition of our primary schools with a rapidity to which I can do no justice, Mr. Wells would instantly project upon the window-pane a vision of a better, breezier, jollier, happier, more adventurous and gallant world, where these musty railway carriages and fusty old women do not exist; where miraculous barges bring tropical fruit to Camberwell by eight o'clock in the morning; where **there** are public nurseries, fountains, and libraries, dining-rooms, drawing-rooms, and marriages; where every citizen is generous and candid, manly and magnificent, and rather like Mr. Wells himself. But nobody is in the least like Mrs. Brown. There are no Mrs. Browns in Utopia. Indeed I do not think that Mr. Wells, in his passion to make her what she ought to be, would waste a thought upon her as she is. And what would Mr. Galsworthy see? Can we doubt that the walls of Doulton's factory would take his fancy? There are women in that factory who make twenty-five dozen earthenware pots every day. There are mothers in the Mile End Road who depend upon the farthings which those women earn. But there are employers in Surrey who are even now smoking rich cigars while the nightingale sings. Burning with indignation, stuffed with information, arraiging civilization, Mr. Galsworthy would only see in Mrs.

Brown a pot broken on the wheel and thrown into the corner.

Mr. Bennett, alone of the Edwardians, would keep his eyes in the carriage. He, indeed, would observe every detail with immense care. He would notice the advertisements; the pictures of Swanage and Portsmouth; the way in which the cushion bulged between the buttons; how Mrs. Brown wore a brooch which had cost three-and-ten-three at Whitworth's bazaar; and had mended both gloves—indeed the thumb of the left-hand glove had been replaced. And he would observe, at length, how this was the non-stop train from Windsor which calls at Richmond for the convenience of middle-class residents, who can afford to go to the theatre but have not reached the social rank which can afford motor-cars, though it is true, there are occasions (he would tell us what), when they hire them from a company (he would tell us which). And so he would gradually sidle sedately towards Mrs. Brown, and would remark how she had been left a little copyhold, not freehold, property at Datchet, which, however, was mortgaged to Mr. Bungay the solicitor—but why should I presume to invent Mr. Bennett? Does not Mr. Bennett write novels himself? I will open the first book that chance puts in my way—*Hilda Lessways*. Let us see how he makes us feel that Hilda is real, true, and convincing, as a novelist should. She shut the door in a soft, controlled way, which showed the constraint of her relations with her mother. She was fond of reading *Maud*; she was endowed with the power to feel intensely. So far, so good; in his leisurely, surefooted way Mr. Bennett is trying in these first pages, where every touch is important, to show us the kind of girl she was.

But then he begins to describe, not Hilda Lessways, but the view from her bedroom window, the excuse being that Mr. Skel-lorn, the man who collects rents, is coming along that way. Mr. Bennett proceeds:

'The bailiwick of Turnhill lay behind her; and all the murky district of the Five Towns, of which Turnhill is the northern outpost, lay to the south. At the foot of Chatterley Wood the canal wound in large curves on its way towards the undefiled plains of Cheshire and the sea. On the canal-side, exactly opposite to Hilda's window, was a flour-mill, that sometimes made nearly as much smoke as the kilns and the chimneys closing the prospect on

either hand. From the flour-mill a bricked path, which separated a considerable row of new cottages from their appurtenant gardens, led straight into Lessways Street, in front of Mrs. Lessway's house. By this path Mr. Skellorn should have arrived, for he inhabited the farthest of the cottages.'

One line of insight would have done more than all those lines of description; but let them pass as the necessary drudgery of the novelist. And now—where is Hilda? Alas. Hilda is still looking out of the window. Passionate and dissatisfied as she was, she was a girl with an eye for houses. She often compared this old Mr. Skellorn with the villas she saw from her bedroom window. Therefore the villas must be described. Mr. Bennett proceeds:

'The row was called Freehold Villas: a consciously proud name in a district where much of the land was copyhold and could only change owners subject to the payment of "fines", and to the feudal consent of a "court" presided over by the agent of a lord of the manor. Most of the dwellings were owned by their occupiers, who, each an absolute monarch of the soil, niggled in his sooty garden of an evening amid the flutter of drying shirts and towels. Freehold Villas symbolized the final triumph of Victorian economics, the apotheosis of the prudent and industrious artisan. It corresponded with a Building Society Secretary's dream of paradise. And indeed it was a very real achievement. Nevertheless, Hilda's irrational contempt would not admit this.'

Heaven be praised, we cry! At last we are coming to Hilda herself. But not so fast. Hilda may have been this, that, and the other; but Hilda not only looked at houses, and thought of houses; Hilda lived in a house. And what sort of a house did Hilda live in? Mr. Bennett proceeds:

'It was one of the two middle houses of a detached terrace of four houses built by her grandfather Lessways, the teapot manufacturer; it was the chief of the four, obviously the habitation of the proprietor of the terrace. One of the corner houses comprised a grocer's shop, and this house had been robbed of its just proportion of garden so that the seigneurial garden-plot might be triflingly larger than the other. The terrace was not a terrace of cottages, but of houses rated at from twenty-six to thirty-six pounds a year; beyond the means of artisans and petty insurance agents and rent-collectors. And further, it was well-

built, generously built; and its architecture, though debased, showed some faint traces of Georgian amenity. It was admittedly the best row of houses in that newly-settled quarter of the town. In coming to it out of Freehold Villas Mr. Skellorn obviously came to something superior, wider, more liberal. Suddenly Hilda heard her mother's voice. . . .'

But we cannot hear her mother's voice, or Hilda's voice; we can only hear Mr. Bennett's voice telling us facts about rents and freeholds and copyholds and fines. What can Mr. Bennett be about? I have formed my own opinion of what Mr. Bennett is about—he is trying to make us imagine for him; he is trying to hypnotize us into the belief that, because he has made a house, there must be a person living there. With all his powers of observation, which are marvellous, with all his sympathy and humanity, which are great, Mr. Bennett has never once looked at Mrs. Brown in her corner. There she sits in the corner of the carriage—that carriage which is travelling, not from Richmond to Waterloo, but from one age of English literature to the next, for Mrs. Brown is eternal, Mrs. Brown is human nature, Mrs. Brown changes only on the surface, it is the novelists who get in and out—there she sits and not one of the Edwardian writers has so much as looked at her. They have looked very powerfully, searchingly, and sympathetically out of the window; at factories, at Utopias, even at the decoration and upholstery of the carriage; but never at her, never at life, never at human nature. And so they have developed a technique of novel-writing which suits their purpose; they have made tools and established conventions which do their business. But those tools are not our tools, and that business is not our business. For us those conventions are ruin, those tools are death.

You may well complain of the vagueness of my language. What is a convention, a tool, you may ask, and what do you mean by saying that Mr. Bennett's and Mr. Wells's and Mr. Galsworthy's conventions are the wrong conventions for the Georgians? The question is difficult: I will attempt a short-cut. A convention in writing is not much different from a convention in manners. Both in life and in literature it is necessary to have some means of bridging the gulf between the hostess and her unknown guest on the one hand, the writer and his unknown reader on the other. The hostess bethinks her of the weather, for generations of

hostesses have established the fact that this is a subject of universal interest in which we all believe. She begins by saying that we are having a wretched May, and, having thus got into touch with her unknown guest, proceeds to matters of greater interest. So it is in literature. The writer must get into touch with his reader by putting before him something which he recognizes, which therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him willing to co-operate in the far more difficult business of intimacy. And it is of the highest importance that this common meeting-place should be reached easily, almost instinctively, in the dark, with one's eyes shut. Here is Mr. Bennett making use of this common ground in the passage which I have quoted. The problem before him was to make us believe in the reality of Hilda Lessways. So he began, being an Edwardian, by describing accurately and minutely the sort of house Hilda lived in, and the sort of house she saw from the window. House property was the common ground from which the Edwardians found it easy to proceed to intimacy. Indirect as it seems to us, the convention worked admirably, and thousands of Hilda Lessways were launched upon the world by this means. For that age and generation, the convention was a good one.

But now, if you will allow me to pull my own anecdote to pieces, you will see how keenly I felt the lack of a convention, and how serious a matter it is when the tools of one generation are useless for the next. The incident had made a great impression on me. But how was I to transmit it to you? All I could do was to report as accurately as I could what was said, to describe in detail what was worn, to say, despairingly, that all sorts of scenes rushed into my mind, to proceed to tumble them out pell-mell, and to describe this vivid, this overmastering impression by likening it to a draught or a smell of burning. To tell you the truth, I was also strongly tempted to manufacture a three-volume novel about the old lady's son, and his adventures crossing the Atlantic, and her daughter, and how she kept a milliner's shop in Westminster, the past life of Smith himself, and his house at Sheffield, though such stories seem to me the most dreary, irrelevant, and humbugging affairs in the world.

But if I had done that I should have escaped the appalling effort of saying what I meant. And to have got at what I meant I should have had to go back and back; to experiment with one

thing and another; to try this sentence and that, referring each word to my vision, matching it as exactly as possible, and knowing that somehow I had to find a common ground between us, a convention which would not seem to you too odd, unreal, and far-fetched to believe in. I admit that I shirked that arduous undertaking. I let my Mrs. Brown slip through my fingers. I have told you nothing whatever about her. But that is partly the great Edwardians' fault. I asked them—they are my elders and betters—How shall I begin to describe this woman's character? And they said: 'Begin by saying that her father kept a shop in Harrogate. Ascertain the rent. Ascertain the wages of shop assistants in the year 1878. Discover what her mother died of. Describe cancer. Describe calico. Describe——' But I cried: 'Stop! Stop!' And I regret to say that I threw that ugly, that clumsy, that incongruous tool out of the window, for I knew that if I began describing the cancer and the calico, my Mrs. Brown, that vision to which I cling though I know no way of imparting it to you, would have been dulled and tarnished and vanished for ever.

That is what I mean by saying that the Edwardian tools are the wrong ones for us to use. They have laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of things. They have given us a house in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human beings who live there. To give them their due, they have made that house much better worth living in. But if you hold that novels are in the first place about people, and only in the second about the houses they live in, that is the wrong way to set about it. Therefore, you see, the Georgian writer had to begin by throwing away the method that was in use at the moment. He was left alone there facing Mrs. Brown without any method of conveying her to the reader. But that is inaccurate. A writer is never alone. There is always the public with him—if not on the same seat, at least in the compartment next door. Now the public is a strange travelling companion. In England it is a very suggestible and docile creature, which, once you get it to attend, will believe implicitly what it is told for a certain number of years. If you say to the public with sufficient conviction: 'All women have tails, and all men humps,' it will actually learn to see women with tails and men with humps, and will think it very revolutionary and probably improper if you say: 'Nonsense. Monkeys have tails and camels humps. But men

and women have brains, and they have hearts; they think and they feel,'—that will seem to it a bad joke, and an improper one into the bargain.

But to return. Here is the British public sitting by the writer's side and saying in its vast and unanimous way: 'Old women have houses. They have fathers. They have incomes. They have servants. They have hot-water bottles. That is how we know that they are old women. Mr. Wells and Mr. Bennett and Mr. Galsworthy have always taught us that this is the way to recognize them. But now with your Mrs. Brown—how are we to believe in her? We do not even know whether her villa was called Albert or Balmoral; what she paid for her gloves; or whether her mother died of cancer or of consumption. How can she be alive? No; she is a mere figment of your imagination.'

And old women of course ought to be made of freehold villas and copyhold estates, not of imagination.

The Georgian novelist, therefore, was in an awkward predicament. There was Mrs. Brown protesting that she was different, quite different, from what people made out, and luring the novelist to her rescue by the most fascinating if fleeting glimpse of her charms; there were the Edwardians handing out tools appropriate to house building and house breaking; and there was the British public asseverating that they must see the hot-water bottle first. Meanwhile the train was rushing to the station where we must all get out.

Such, I think, was the predicament in which the young Georgians found themselves about the year 1910. Many of them—I am thinking of Mr. Forster and Mr. Lawrence in particular—spoilt their early work because, instead of throwing away those tools, they tried to use them. They tried to compromise. They tried to combine their own direct sense of the oddity and significance of some character with Mr. Galsworthy's knowledge of the Factory Acts, and Mr. Bennett's knowledge of the Five Towns. They tried it, but they had too keen, too overpowering a sense of Mrs. Brown and her peculiarities to go on trying it much longer. Something had to be done. At whatever cost to life, limb, and damage to valuable property Mrs. Brown must be rescued, expressed, and set in her high relations to the world before the train stopped and she disappeared for ever. And so the smashing

and the crashing began. Thus it is that we hear all round us, in poems and novels and biographies, even in newspaper articles and essays, the sound of breaking and falling, crashing and destruction. It is the prevailing sound of the Georgian age—rather a melancholy one if you think what melodious days there have been in the past, if you think of Shakespeare and Milton and Keats or even of Jane Austen and Thackeray and Dickens; if you think of the language, and the heights to which it can soar when free, and see the same eagle captive, bald, and croaking.

In view of these facts—with these sounds in my ears and these fancies in my brain—I am not going to deny that Mr. Bennett has some reason when he complains that our Georgian writers are unable to make us believe that our characters are real. I am forced to agree that they do not pour out three immortal masterpieces with Victorian regularity every autumn. But, instead of being gloomy, I am sanguine. For this state of things is, I think, inevitable whenever from hoar old age or callow youth the convention ceases to be a means of communication between writer and reader, and becomes instead an obstacle and an impediment. At the present moment we are suffering, not from decay, but from having no code of manners which writers and readers accept as a prelude to the more exciting intercourse of friendship. The literary convention of the time is so artificial—you have to talk about the weather and nothing but the weather throughout the entire visit—that, naturally, the feeble are tempted to outrage, and the strong are led to destroy the very foundations and rules of literary society. Signs of this are everywhere apparent. Grammar is violated; syntax disintegrated; as a boy staying with an aunt for the week-end rolls in the geranium bed out of sheer desperation as the solemnities of the sabbath wear on. The more adult writers do not, of course, indulge in such wanton exhibitions of spleen. Their sincerity is desperate, and their courage tremendous; it is only that they do not know which to use, a fork or their fingers. Thus, if you read Mr. Joyce and Mr. Eliot you will be struck by the indecency of the one, and the obscurity of the other. Mr. Joyce's indecency in *Ulysses* seems to me the conscious and calculated indecency of a desperate man who feels that in order to breathe he must break the windows. At moments, when the window is broken, he is magnificent. But what a waste of energy!

And, after all, how dull indecency is, when it is not the overflowing of a superabundant energy or savagery, but the determined and public-spirited act of a man who needs fresh air! Again, with the obscurity of Mr. Eliot. I think that Mr. Eliot has written some of the loveliest single lines in modern poetry. But how intolerant he is of the old usages and politenesses of society—respect for the weak, consideration for the dull! As I sun myself upon the intense and ravishing beauty of one of his lines, and reflect that I must make a dizzy and dangerous leap to the next, and so on from line to line, like an acrobat flying precariously from bar to bar, I cry out, I confess, for the old decorums, and envy the indolence of my ancestors who, instead of spinning madly through mid-air, dreamt quietly in the shade with a book. Again, in Mr. Strachey's books, *Eminent Victorians* and *Queen Victoria*, the effort and strain of writing against the grain and current of the times is visible too. It is much less visible, of course, for not only is he dealing with facts, which are stubborn things, but he has fabricated, chiefly from eighteenth-century material, a very discreet code of manners of his own, which allows him to sit at the table with the highest in the land and to say a great many things under cover of that exquisite apparel which, had they gone naked, would have been chased by the men-servants from the room. Still, if you compare *Eminent Victorians* with some of Lord Macaulay's essays, though you will feel that Lord Macaulay is always wrong, and Mr. Strachey always right, you will also feel a body, a sweep, a richness in Lord Macaulay's essays which show that his age was behind him; all his strength went straight into his work; none was used for purposes of concealment or of conversion. But Mr. Strachey has had to open our eyes before he made us see; he has had to search out and sew together a very artful manner of speech; and the effort, beautifully though it is concealed, has robbed his work of some of the force that should have gone into it, and limited his scope.

For these reasons, then, we must reconcile ourselves to a season of failures and fragments. We must reflect that where so much strength is spent on finding a way of telling the truth, the truth itself is bound to reach us in rather an exhausted and chaotic condition. Ulysses, Queen Victoria, Mr. Prufrock—to give Mrs. Brown some of the names she has made famous lately—is a little

pale and dishevelled by the time her rescuers reach her. And it is the sound of their axes that we hear—a vigorous and stimulating sound in my ears—unless of course you wish to sleep, when, in the bounty of his concern, Providence has provided a host of writers anxious and able to satisfy your needs.

Thus I have tried, at tedious length, I fear, to answer some of the questions which I began by asking. I have given an account of some of the difficulties which in my view beset the Georgian writer in all his forms. I have sought to excuse him. May I end by venturing to remind you of the duties and responsibilities that are yours as partners in this business of writing books, as companions in the railway carriage, as fellow travellers with Mrs. Brown? For she is just as visible to you who remain silent as to us who tell stories about her. In the course of your daily life this past week you have had far stranger and more interesting experiences than the one I have tried to describe. You have overheard scraps of talk that filled you with amazement. You have gone to bed at night bewildered by the complexity of your feelings. In one day thousands of ideas have coursed through your brains; thousands of emotions have met, collided, and disappeared in astonishing disorder. Nevertheless, you allow the writers to palm off upon you a version of all this, an image of Mrs. Brown, which has no likeness to that surprising apparition whatsoever. In your modesty you seem to consider that writers are of different blood and bone from yourselves; that they know more of Mrs. Brown than you do. Never was there a more fatal mistake. It is this division between reader and writer, this humility on your part, these professional airs and graces on ours, that corrupt and emasculate the books which should be the healthy offspring of a close and equal alliance between us. Hence spring those sleek, smooth novels, those portentous and ridiculous biographies, that milk and watery criticism, those poems melodiously celebrating the innocence of roses and sheep which pass so plausibly for literature at the present time.

Your part is to insist that writers shall come down off their plinths and pedestals, and describe beautifully if possible, truthfully at any rate, our Mrs. Brown. You should insist that she is an old lady of unlimited capacity and infinite variety; capable of appearing in any place; wearing any dress; saying anything and

doing heaven knows what. But the things she says and the things she does and her eyes and her nose and her speech and her silence have an overwhelming fascination, for she is, of course, the spirit we live by, life itself.

But do not expect just at present a complete and satisfactory presentment of her. Tolerate the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure. Your help is invoked in a good cause. For I will make one final and surpassingly rash prediction—we are trembling on the verge of one of the great ages of English literature. But it can only be reached if we are determined never, never to desert Mrs. Brown.

George Moore

THE only criticism worth having at present is that which is spoken, not written—spoken over wineglasses and coffee-cups late at night, flashed out on the spur of the moment by people passing who have not time to finish their sentences, let alone consider the dues of editors or the feelings of friends. About living writers these talkers (it is one of their most engaging peculiarities) are always in violent disagreement. Take George Moore, for example. George Moore is the best living novelist—and the worst; writes the most beautiful prose of his time—and the feeblest; has a passion for literature which none of those dismal pundits, his contemporaries, shares; but how whimsical his judgements are, how ill-balanced, childish, and egotistical, into the bargain! So they hammer the horseshoe out; so the sparks fly; and the worth of the criticism lies not so much in the accuracy of each blow as in the heat it engenders, the sense it kindles that the matter of George Moore and his works is of the highest importance, which, without waiting another instant, we must settle for ourselves.

Perhaps it is not accident only, but a vague recollection of dipping and dallying in *Esther Waters*, *Evelyn Innes*, *The Lake*, which makes us take down in its new and stately form *Hail and Farewell* (Heinemann)—the two large volumes which George Moore has written openly and directly about himself. For all his novels are written, covertly and obliquely, about himself, so at least memory would persuade us, and it may help us to understand them if we steep ourselves in the pure waters which are elsewhere tinged with fictitious flavours. But are not all novels about the writer's self, we might ask? It is only as he sees people that we can see them; his fortunes colour and his oddities shape his vision until what we see is not the thing itself, but the thing seen and the seer inextricably mixed. There are degrees, however. The great novelist feels, sees, believes with such intensity of conviction that he hurls his belief outside himself and it flies off and lives an independent life of its own, becomes Natasha, Pierre, Levin, and is no longer Tolstoy. When, however, Mr. Moore creates a Natasha she may be charming, foolish, lovely, but her beauty,

her folly, her charm are not hers, but Mr. Moore's. All her qualities refer to him. In other words, Mr. Moore is completely lacking in dramatic power. On the face of it, *Esther Waters* has all the appearance of a great novel; it has sincerity, shapeliness, style; it has surpassing seriousness and integrity; but because Mr. Moore has not the strength to project Esther from himself its virtues collapse and fall about it like a tent with a broken pole. There it lies, this novel without a heroine, and what remains of it is George Moore himself, a ruin of lovely language, and some exquisite descriptions of the Sussex downs. For the novelist who has no dramatic power, no fire of conviction within, leans upon Nature for support; she lifts him up and enhances his mood without destroying it.

But the defects of a novelist may well be the glories of his brother the autobiographer, and we find, to our delight, that the very qualities which weaken Mr. Moore's novels are the making of his memoirs. This complex character, at once diffident and self-assertive, this sportsman who goes out shooting in ladies' high-heeled boots, this amateur jockey who loves literature beyond the apple of his eye, this amorist who is so innocent, this sensualist who is so ascetic, this complex and uneasy character, in short, with its lack of starch and pomp and humbug, its pliability and malice and shrewdness and incompetence, is made of too many incompatible elements to concentrate into the diamond of a great artist, and is better occupied in exploring its own vagaries than in explaining those of other people. For one thing, Mr. Moore is without that robust belief in himself which leads men to prophesy and create. Nobody was ever more diffident. As a little boy they told him that only an ugly old woman would marry him, and he has never got over it. 'For it is difficult for me to believe any good of myself. Within the oftentimes bombastic and truculent appearance that I present to the world trembles a heart shy as a wren in the hedgerow or a mouse along the wainscoting.' The least noise startles him, and the ordinary proceedings of mankind fill him with wonder and alarm. Their streets have so many names; their coats have so many buttons; the ordinary business of life is altogether beyond him. But with the timidity of the mouse he has also its gigantic boldness. This meek grey innocent creature runs right over the lion's paws. There is nothing that Mr. Moore will

not say; by his own confession he ought to be excluded from every drawing-room in South Kensington. If his friends forgive him it is only because to Mr. Moore all things are forgiven. Once when he was a child, 'inspired by an uncontrollable desire to break the monotony of infancy', he threw all his clothes into a hawthorn tree and 'ran naked in front of my nurse or governess screaming with delight at the embarrassment I was causing her.' The habit has remained with him. He loves to take off his clothes and run screaming with delight at the fuss and blush and embarrassment which he is causing that dear old governess, the British Public. But the antics of Mr. Moore, though impish and impudent, are, after all, so amusing and so graceful that the governess, it is said, sometimes hides behind a tree to watch. That scream of his, that garrulous chuckle as of small birds chattering in a nest, is a merry sound; and then how melodiously he draws out his long notes when dusk descends and the stars rise! Always you will find him haunting the evening, when the downs are fading into waves of silver and the grey Irish fields are melting into the grey Irish hills. The storm never breaks over his head, the thunder never roars in his ears, the rain never drenches him. No; the worst that befalls him is that Teresa has not filled the Moderator lamp sufficiently full, so that the company which is dining in the garden under the apple tree must adjourn to the dining-room, where Mr. Osborne, Mr. Hughes, Mr. Longworth, Mr. Seumas O'Sullivan, Mr. Atkinson, and Mr. Yeats are awaiting them.

And then in the dining-room, Mr. Moore sitting down and offering a cigar to his friends, takes up again the thread of that interminable discourse, which, if it lapses into the gulfs of reverie for a moment, begins anew wherever he finds a bench or chair to sit on or can link his arm in a friend's, or can find even some discreet sympathetic animal who will only occasionally lift a paw in silence. He talks incessantly about books and politics; of the vision that came to him in the Chelsea road; how Mr. Colville bred Belgian hares on the Sussex downs; about the death of his cat; the Roman Catholic religion; how dogma is the death of literature; how the names of poets determine their poetry; how Mr. Yeats is like a crow, and he himself has been forced to sit on the window-sill in his pyjamas. One thing follows another; out of the present flowers the past; it is as easy, inconsequent, melodious

as the smoke of those fragrant cigars. But as one listens more attentively one perceives that while each topic floats up as easily as cigar smoke into the air, the blue wreaths have a strange fixity; they do not disperse, they unite; they build up the airy chambers of a lifetime, and as we listen in the Temple Gardens, in Ebury Street, in Paris, in Dublin to Mr. Moore talking, we explore from start to finish, from those earliest days in Ireland to these latest in London, the habitation of his soul.

But let us apply Mr. Moore's own test to Mr. Moore's own work. What interests him, he says, is not the three or four beautiful poems that a man may have written, but the mind that he brings into the world; and 'by a mind I mean a new way of feeling and seeing'. When the fierce tide of talk once more washes the battlements of Mr. Moore's achievement let us throw into mid-stream these remarks; not one of his novels is a masterpiece; they are silken tents which have no poles; but he has brought a new mind into the world; he has given us a new way of feeling and seeing; he has devised—very painfully, for he is above all things painstaking, eking out a delicate gift laboriously—a means of liquidating the capricious and volatile essence of himself and decanting it in these memoirs; and that, whatever the degree, is triumph, achievement, immortality. If, further, we try to establish the degree we shall go on to say that **no** one so inveterately literary is among the great writers; literature has wound itself about him like a veil, forbidding him the **free** use of his limbs; the phrase comes to him before the emotion; **but** we must add that he is nevertheless a born writer, a man who detests meals, servants, ease, respectability or anything that gets between him and his art; who has kept his freedom when most of his contemporaries have long ago lost theirs; who is ashamed of nothing but of being ashamed; who says whatever he has it in his mind to say, and has taught himself an accent, a cadence, indeed a language, for saying it in which, though they are not English, but Irish, will give him his place among the lesser immortals of our tongue.

The Novels of E. M. Forster

I

THERE are many reasons which should prevent one from criticizing the work of contemporaries. Besides the obvious uneasiness—the fear of hurting feelings—there is too the difficulty of being just. Coming out one by one, their books seem like parts of a design which is slowly uncovered. Our appreciation may be intense, but our curiosity is even greater. Does the new fragment add anything to what went before? Does it carry out our theory of the author's talent, or must we alter our forecast? Such questions ruffle what should be the smooth surface of our criticism and make it full of argument and interrogation. With a novelist like Mr. Forster this is specially true, for he is any case an author about whom there is considerable disagreement. There is something baffling and evasive in the very nature of his gifts. So, remembering that we are at best only building up a theory which may be knocked down in a year or two by Mr. Forster himself, let us take Mr. Forster's novels in the order in which they were written, and tentatively and cautiously try to make them yield us an answer.

The order in which they were written is indeed of some importance, for at the outset we see that Mr. Forster is extremely susceptible to the influence of time. He sees his people much at the mercy of those conditions which change with the years. He is acutely conscious of the bicycle and of the motor-car; of the public school and of the university; of the suburb and of the city. The social historian will find his books full of illuminating information. In 1905 Lilia learned to bicycle, coasted down the High Street on Sunday evening, and fell off at the turn by the church. For this she was given a talking to by her brother-in-law which she remembered to her dying day. It is on Tuesday that the housemaid cleans out the drawing-room at Sawston. Old maids blow into their gloves when they take them off. Mr. Forster is a novelist, that is to say, who sees his people in close contact with their surroundings. And therefore the colour and constitution of

the year 1905 affect him far more than any year in the calendar could affect the romantic Meredith or the poetic Hardy. But we discover as we turn the page that observation is not an end in itself; it is rather the goad, the gadfly driving Mr. Forster to provide a refuge from this misery, an escape from this meanness. Hence we arrive at that balance of forces which plays so large a part in the structure of Mr. Forster's novels. Sawston implies Italy; timidity, wildness; convention, freedom; unreality, reality. These are the villains and heroes of much of his writing. In *Where Angels Fear to Tread* the disease, convention, and the remedy, nature, are provided if anything with too eager a simplicity, too simple an assurance, but with what a freshness, what a charm! Indeed it would not be excessive if we discovered in this slight first novel evidence of powers which only needed, one might hazard, a more generous diet to ripen into wealth and beauty. Twenty-two years might well have taken the sting from the satire and shifted the proportions of the whole. But, if that is to some extent true, the years have had no power to obliterate the fact that, though Mr. Forster may be sensitive to the bicycle and the duster, he is also the most persistent devotee of the soul. Beneath bicycles and dusters, Sawston and Italy, Philip, Harriet, and Miss Abbott, there always lies for him —it is this which makes him so tolerant a satirist—a burning core. It is the soul; it is reality; it is truth; it is poetry; it is love; it decks itself in many shapes, dresses itself in many disguises. But get at it he must; keep from it he cannot. Over brakes and byres, over drawing-room carpets and mahogany sideboards, he flies in pursuit. Naturally the spectacle is sometimes comic, often fatiguing; but there are moments—and his first novel provides several instances—when he lays his hands on the prize.

Yet, if we ask ourselves upon which occasions this happens and how, it will seem that those passages which are least didactic, least conscious of the pursuit of beauty, succeed best in achieving it. When he allows himself a holiday—some phrase like that comes to our lips; when he forgets the vision and frolics and sports with the fact; when, having planted the apostles of culture in their hotel, he creates airily, joyfully, spontaneously, Gino the dentist's son sitting in the café with his friends, or describes—it is a masterpiece of comedy—the performance of *Lucia di Lammermoor*,

it is then that we feel that his aim is achieved. Judging, therefore, on the evidence of this first book, with its fantasy, its penetration, its remarkable sense of design, we should have said that once Mr. Forster had acquired freedom, had passed beyond the boundaries of Sawston, he would stand firmly on his feet among the descendants of Jane Austen and Peacock. But the second novel, *The Longest Journey*, leaves us baffled and puzzled. The opposition is still the same: truth and untruth; Cambridge and Sawston; sincerity and sophistication. But everything is accentuated. He builds his Sawston of thicker bricks and destroys it with stronger blasts. The contrast between poetry and realism is much more precipitous. And now we see much more clearly to what a task his gifts commit him. We see that what might have been a passing mood is in truth a conviction. He believes that a novel must take sides in the human conflict. He sees beauty—none more keenly; but beauty imprisoned in a fortress of brick and mortar whence he must extricate her. Hence he is always constrained to build the cage—society in all its intricacy and triviality—before he can free the prisoner. The omnibus, the villa, the suburban residence, are an essential part of his design. They are required to imprison and impede the flying flame which is so remorselessly caged behind them. At the same time, as we read *The Longest Journey* we are aware of a mocking spirit of fantasy which flouts his seriousness. No one seizes more deftly the shades and shadows of the social comedy; no one more amusingly hits off the comedy of luncheon and tea party and a game of tennis at the rectory. His old maids, his clergy, are the most lifelike we have had since Jane Austen laid down the pen. But he has into the bargain what Jane Austen had not—the impulses of a poet. The neat surface is always being thrown into disarray by an outburst of lyric poetry. Again and again in *The Longest Journey* we are delighted by some exquisite description of the country; or some lovely sight—like that when Rickie and Stephen send the paper boats burning through the arch—is made visible to us forever. Here, then, is a difficult family of gifts to persuade to live in harmony together: satire and sympathy; fantasy and fact; poetry and a prim moral sense. No wonder that we are often aware of contrary currents that run counter to each other and prevent the book from bearing down upon us and overwhelming us with the authority of a

masterpiece. Yet if there is one gift more essential to a novelist than another it is the power of combination—the single vision. The success of the masterpieces seems to lie not so much in their freedom from faults—indeed we tolerate the grossest errors in them all—but in the immense persuasiveness of a mind which has completely mastered its perspective.

II

We look then, as time goes on, for signs that Mr. Forster is committing himself; that he is allying himself to one of the two great camps to which most novelists belong. Speaking roughly, we may divide them into the preachers and the teachers, headed by Tolstoy and Dickens, on the one hand, and the pure artists, headed by Jane Austen and Turgenev, on the other. Mr. Forster, it seems, has a strong impulse to belong to both camps at once. He has many of the instincts and aptitudes of the pure artist (to adopt the old classification) – an exquisite prose style, an acute sense of comedy, a power of creating characters in a few strokes which live in an atmosphere of their own; but he is at the same time highly conscious of a message. Behind the rainbow of wit and sensibility there is a vision which he is determined that we shall see. But his vision is of a peculiar kind and his message of an elusive nature. He has not great interest in institutions. He has none of that wide social curiosity which marks the work of Mr. Wells. The divorce law and the poor law come in for little of his attention. His concern is with the private life; his message is addressed to the soul. 'It is the private life that holds out the mirror to infinity; personal intercourse, and that alone, that ever hints at a personality beyond our daily vision.' Our business is not to build in brick and mortar, but to draw together the seen and the unseen. We must learn to build the 'rainbow bridge that should connect the prose in us with the passion. Without it we are meaningless fragments, half monks, half beasts.' This belief that it is the private life that matters, that it is the soul that is eternal, runs through all his writing. It is the conflict between Sawston and Italy in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*; between Rickie and Agnes in *The Longest Journey*; between Lucy and Cecil in *A Room with a View*. It deepens, it becomes more insistent as time passes. It forces him on from the

lighter and more whimsical short novels past that curious interlude, *The Celestial Omnibus*, to the two large books, *Howards End* and *A Passage to India*, which mark his prime.

But before we consider those two books let us look for a moment at the nature of the problem he sets himself. It is the soul that matters; and the soul, as we have seen, is caged in a solid villa of red brick somewhere in the suburbs of London. It seems, then, that if his books are to succeed in their mission his reality must at certain points become irradiated; his brick must be lit up; we must see the whole building saturated with light. We have at once to believe in the complete reality of the suburb and in the complete reality of the soul. In this combination of realism and mysticism his closest affinity is, perhaps, with Ibsen. Ibsen has the same realistic power. A room is to him a room, a writing table a writing table, and a waste-paper basket a waste-paper basket. At the same time, the paraphernalia of reality have at certain moments to become the veil through which we see infinity. When Ibsen achieves this, as he certainly does, it is not by performing some miraculous conjuring trick at the critical moment. He achieves it by putting us into the right mood from the very start and by giving us the right materials for his purpose. He gives us the effect of ordinary life, as Mr. Forster does, but he gives it us by choosing a very few facts and those of a highly relevant kind. Thus when the moment of illumination comes we accept it implicitly. We are neither roused nor puzzled; we do not have to ask ourselves, What does this mean? We feel simply that the thing we are looking at is lit up, and its depths revealed. It has not ceased to be itself by becoming something else.

Something of the same problem lies before Mr. Forster—how to connect the actual thing with the meaning of the thing and to carry the reader's mind across the chasm which divides the two without spilling a single drop of its belief. At certain moments on the Arno, in Hertfordshire, in Surrey, beauty leaps from the scabbard, the fire of truth flames through the crusted earth; we must see the red-brick villa in the suburbs of London lit up. But it is in these great scenes which are the justification of the huge elaboration of the realistic novel that we are most aware of failure. For it is here that Mr. Forster makes the change from realism to symbolism; here that the object which has been so un-

compromisingly solid becomes, or should become, luminously transparent. He fails, one is tempted to think, chiefly because that admirable gift of his for observation has served him too well. He has recorded too much and too literally. He has given us an almost photographic picture on one side of the page; on the other he asks us to see the same view transformed and radiant with eternal fires. The bookcase which falls upon Leonard Bast in *Howards End* should perhaps come down upon him with all the dead weight of smoke-dried culture; the Marabar caves should appear to us not real caves but, it may be, the soul of India. Miss Quested should be transformed from an English girl on a picnic to arrogant Europe straying into the heart of the East and getting lost there. We qualify these statements, for indeed we are not quite sure whether we have guessed aright. Instead of getting that sense of instant certainty which we get in *The Wild Duck* or in *The Master Builder*, we are puzzled, worried. What does this mean? we ask ourselves. What ought we to understand by this? And the hesitation is fatal. For we doubt both things—the real and the symbolical: Mrs. Moore, the nice old lady, and Mrs. Moore, the sibyl. The conjunction of these two different realities seems to cast doubt upon them both. Hence it is that **there** is so often an ambiguity at the heart of Mr. Forster's novels. **We** feel that something has failed us at the critical moment; and **instead** of seeing, as we do in *The Master Builder*, one single whole we see two separate parts.

The stories collected under the title of *The Celestial Omnibus* represent, it may be, an attempt on Mr. Forster's part to simplify the problem which so often troubles him of connecting the prose and poetry of life. Here he admits definitely if discreetly the possibility of magic. Omnibuses drive to Heaven; Pan is heard in the brushwood; girls turn into trees. The stories are extremely charming. They release the fantasticality which is laid under such heavy burdens in the novels. But the vein of fantasy is not deep enough or strong enough to fight single-handed against those other impulses which are part of his endowment. We feel that he is an uneasy truant in fairyland. Behind the hedge he always hears the motor horn and the shuffling feet of tired wayfarers, and soon he must return. One slim volume indeed contains all that he has allowed himself of pure fantasy. We pass from the freakish

land where boys leap into the arms of Pan and girls become trees to the two Miss Schlegels, who have an income of six hundred pounds apiece and live in Wickham Place.

III

Much though we may regret the change, we cannot doubt that it was right. For none of the books before *Howards End* and *A Passage to India* altogether drew upon the full range of Mr. Forster's powers. With his queer and in some ways contradictory assortment of gifts, he needed, it seemed, some subject which would stimulate his highly sensitive and active intelligence, but would not demand the extremes of romance or passion; a subject which gave him material for criticism, and invited investigation; a subject which asked to be built up of an enormous number of slight yet precise observations, capable of being tested by an extremely honest yet sympathetic mind; yet, with all this, a subject which when finally constructed would show up against the torrents of the sunset and the eternities of night with a symbolical significance. In *Howards End* the lower middle, the middle, the upper middle classes of English society are so built up into a complete fabric. It is an attempt on a larger scale than hitherto, and, if it fails, the size of the attempt is largely responsible. Indeed, as we think back over the many pages of this elaborate and highly skilful book, with its immense technical accomplishment, and also its penetration, its wisdom, and its beauty, we may wonder in what mood of the moment we can have been prompted to call it a failure. By all the rules, still more by the keen interest with which we have read it from start to finish, we should have said success. The reason is suggested perhaps by the manner of one's praise. Elaboration, skill, wisdom, penetration, beauty—they are all there, but they lack fusion; they lack cohesion; the book as a whole lacks force. Schlegels, Wilcoxes, and Basts, with all that they stand for of class and environment, emerge with extraordinary verisimilitude, but the whole effect is less satisfying than that of the much slighter but beautifully harmonious *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. Again we have the sense that there is some perversity in Mr. Forster's endowment so that his gifts in their variety and number tend to trip each other up. If he were less

scrupulous, less just, less sensitively aware of the different aspects of every case, he could, we feel, come down with greater force on one precise point. As it is, the strength of his blow is dissipated. He is like a light sleeper who is always being woken by something in the room. The poet is twitched away by the satirist; the comedian is tapped on the shoulder by the moralist; he never loses himself or forgets himself for long in sheer delight in the beauty or the interest of things as they are. For this reason the lyrical passages in his books, often of great beauty in themselves, fail of their due effect in the context. Instead of flowering naturally—as in Proust, for instance—from an overflow of interest and beauty in the object itself, we feel that they have been called into existence by some irritation, are the effort of a mind outraged by ugliness to supplement it with a beauty which, because it originates in protest, has something a little febrile about it.

Yet in *Howards End* there are, one feels, in solution all the qualities that are needed to make a masterpiece. The characters are extremely real to us. The ordering of the story is masterly. That indefinable but highly important thing, the atmosphere of the book, is alight with intelligence; not a speck of humbug, not an atom of falsity is allowed to settle. And again, but on a larger battlefield, the struggle goes forward which takes place in all Mr. Forster's novels—the struggle between the things that matter and the things that do not matter, between reality and sham, between the truth and the lie. Again the comedy is exquisite and the observation faultless. But again, just as we are yielding ourselves to the pleasures of the imagination, a little jerk rouses us. We are tapped on the shoulder. We are to notice this, to take heed of that. Margaret or Helen, we are made to understand, is not speaking simply as herself; her words have another and a larger intention. So, exerting ourselves to find out the meaning, we step from the enchanted world of imagination, where our faculties work freely, to the twilight world of theory, where only our intellect functions dutifully. Such moments of disillusionment have the habit of coming when Mr. Forster is most in earnest, at the crisis of the book, where the sword falls or the bookcase drops. They bring, as we have noted already, a curious insubstantiality into the 'great scenes' and the important figures. But they absent themselves entirely from the comedy. They make us wish, foolishly

enough, to dispose Mr. Forster's gifts differently and to restrict him to write comedy only. For directly he ceases to feel responsible for his characters' behaviour, and forgets that he should solve the problem of the universe, he is the most diverting of novelists. The admirable Tibby and the exquisite Mrs. Munt in *Howards End*, though thrown in largely to amuse us, bring a breath of fresh air in with them. They inspire us with the intoxicating belief that they are free to wander as far from their creator as they choose. Margaret, Helen, Leonard Bast, are closely tethered and vigilantly overlooked lest they may take matters into their own hands and upset the theory. But Tibby and Mrs. Munt go where they like, say what they like, do what they like. The lesser characters and the unimportant scenes in Mr. Forster's novels thus often remain more vivid than those with which, apparently, most pain has been taken. But it would be unjust to part from this big, serious, and highly interesting book without recognizing that it is an important if unsatisfactory piece of work which may well be the prelude to something as large but less anxious.

IV

Many years passed before *A Passage to India* appeared. Those who hoped that in the interval Mr. Forster might have developed his technique so that it yielded rather more easily to the impress of his whimsical mind and gave freer outlet to the poetry and fantasy which play about him were disappointed. The attitude is precisely the same four-square attitude which walks up to life as if it were a house with a front door, puts its hat on the table in the hall, and proceeds to visit all the rooms in an orderly manner. The house is still the house of the British middle classes. But there is a change from *Howards End*. Hitherto Mr. Forster has been apt to pervade his books like a careful hostess who is anxious to introduce, to explain, to warn her guests of a step here, of a draught there. But here, perhaps in some disillusionment both with his guests and with his house, he seems to have relaxed these cares. We are allowed to ramble over this extraordinary continent almost alone. We notice things, about the country especially, spontaneously, accidentally almost, as if we were actually there;

and now it was the sparrows flying about the pictures that caught our eyes, now the elephant with the painted forehead, now the enormous but badly designed ranges of hills. The people too, particularly the Indians, have something of the same casual, inevitable quality. They are not perhaps quite so important as the land, but they are alive; they are sensitive. No longer do we feel, as we used to feel in England, that they will be allowed to go only so far and no further lest they may upset some theory of the author's. Aziz is a free agent. He is the most imaginative character that Mr. Forster has yet created, and recalls Gino the dentist in his first book, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. We may guess indeed that it has helped Mr. Forster to have put the ocean between him and Sawston. It is a relief, for a time, to be beyond the influence of Cambridge. Though it is still a necessity for him to build a model world which he can submit to delicate and precise criticism, the model is on a larger scale. The English society, with all its pettiness and its vulgarity and its streak of heroism, is set against a bigger and more sinister background. And though it is still true that there are ambiguities in important places, moments of imperfect symbolism, a greater accumulation of facts than the imagination is able to deal with, it seems as if the double vision which troubled us in the earlier books was in process of becoming single. The saturation is much more thorough. Mr. Forster has almost achieved the great feat of animating this dense, compact body of observation with a spiritual light. The book shows signs of fatigue and disillusionment; but it has chapters of clear and triumphant beauty, and above all it makes us wonder, What will he write next?

Notes on D. H. Lawrence

THE partiality, the inevitable imperfection of contemporary criticism can best be guarded against, perhaps, by making in the first place a full confession of one's disabilities, so far as it is possible to distinguish them. Thus by way of preface to the following remarks upon D. H. Lawrence, the present writer has to state that until April 1931 he was known to her almost solely by reputation and scarcely at all by experience. His reputation, which was that of a prophet, the exponent of some mystical theory of sex, the devotee of cryptic terms, the inventor of a new terminology which made free use of such words as solar plexus and the like, was not attractive; to follow submissively in his tracks seemed an unthinkable aberration; and as chance would have it, the few pieces of his writing that issued from behind this dark cloud of reputation seemed unable to rouse any sharp curiosity or to dispel the lurid phantom. There was, to begin with, *Tresspassers*, a hot, scented, overwrought piece of work, as it seemed; then *A Prussian Officer*, of which no clear impression remained except of starting muscles and forced obscenity; then *The Lost Girl*, a compact and seamanlike piece of work, stuffed with careful observation rather in the Bennett manner; then one or two sketches of Italian travel of great beauty, but fragmentary and broken off; and then two little books of poems, *Nettles* and *Pansies*, which read like the sayings that small boys scribble upon stiles to make housemaids jump and titter.

Meanwhile, the chants of the worshippers at the shrine of Lawrence became more rapt; their incense thicker and their gyrations more mazy and more mystic. His death last year gave them still greater liberty and still greater impetus; his death, too, irritated the respectable; and it was the irritation roused by the devout and the shocked, and the ceremonies of the devout and the scandal of the shocked, that drove one at last to read *Sons and Lovers* in order to see whether, as so often happens, the master is not altogether different from the travesty presented by his disciples.

This then was the angle of approach, and it will be seen that it

is an angle that shuts off many views and distorts others. But read from this angle, *Sons and Lovers* emerged with astonishing vividness, like an island from off which the mist has suddenly lifted. Here it lay, clean cut, decisive, masterly, hard as rock, shaped, proportioned by a man who, whatever else he might be— prophet or villain, was undoubtedly the son of a miner who had been born and bred in Nottingham. But this hardness, this clarity, this admirable economy and sharpness of the stroke are not rare qualities in an age of highly efficient novelists. The lucidity, the ease, the power of the writer to indicate with one stroke and then to refrain indicated a mind of great power and penetration. But these impressions, after they had built up the lives of the Morels, their kitchens, food, sinks, manner of speech, were succeeded by another far rarer, and of far greater interest. For after we have exclaimed that this coloured and stereoscopic representation of life is so like that surely it must be alive - like the bird that pecked the cherry in the picture—one feels, from some indescribable brilliance, sombreness, significance, that the room is put into order. Some hand has been at work before we entered. Casual and natural as the arrangement seems, as if we had opened the door and come in by chance, some hand, some eye of astonishing penetration and force, has swiftly arranged the whole scene, so that we feel that it is more exciting, more moving, in some ways fuller of life than one had thought real life could be, as if a painter had brought out the leaf or the tulip or the jar by pulling a green curtain behind it. But what is the green curtain that Lawrence has pulled so as to accentuate the colours? One never catches Lawrence—this is one of his most remarkable qualities-- 'arranging'. Words, scenes flow as fast and direct as if he merely traced them with a free rapid hand on sheet after sheet. Not a sentence seems thought about twice: not a word added for its effect on the architecture of the phrase. There is no arrangement that makes us say: 'Look at this. This scene, this dialogue has the meaning of the book hidden in it.' One of the curious qualities of *Sons and Lovers* is that one feels an unrest, a little quiver and shimmer in his page, as if it were composed of separate gleaming objects, by no means content to stand still and be looked at. There is a scene of course; a character; yes, and people related to each other by a net of sensations; but these are not there—as in Proust

—for themselves. They do not admit of prolonged exploration, of rapture in them for the sake of rapture, as one may sit in front of the famous hawthorn hedge in *Swann's Way* and look at it. No, there is always something further on, another goal. The impatience, the need for getting on beyond the object before us, seem to contract, to shrivel up, to curtail scenes to their barest, to flash character simply and starkly in front of us. We must not look for more than a second; we must hurry on. But to what?

Probably to some scene which has very little to do with character, with story, with any of the usual resting places, eminences, and consummations of the usual novel. The only thing that we are given to rest upon, to expand upon, to feel to the limits of our powers is some rapture of physical being. Such for instance is the scene when Paul and Miriam swing in the barn. Their bodies become incandescent, glowing, significant, as in other books a passage of emotion burns in that way. For the writer it seems the scene is possessed of a transcendental significance. Not in talk nor in story nor in death nor in love, but here as the body of the boy swings in the barn.

But, perhaps, because such a state cannot satisfy for long, perhaps because Lawrence lacks the final power which makes things entire in themselves, the effect of the book is that stability is never reached. The world of *Sons and Lovers* is perpetually in process of cohesion and dissolution. The magnet that tries to draw together the different particles of which the beautiful and vigorous world of Nottingham is made is the incandescent body, this beauty glowing in the flesh, this intense and burning light. Hence whatever we are shown seems to have a moment of its own. Nothing rests secure to be looked at. All is being sucked away by some dissatisfaction, some superior beauty, or desire, or possibility. The book therefore excites, irritates, moves, changes, seems full of stir and unrest and desire for something withheld, like the body of the hero. The whole world—it is a proof of the writer's remarkable strength—is broken and tossed by the magnet of the young man who cannot bring the separate parts into a unity which will satisfy him.

This allows, partly at least, of a simple explanation. Paul Morel, like Lawrence himself, is the son of a miner. He is dissatisfied with his conditions. One of his first actions on selling a picture is to

buy an evening suit. He is not a member, like Proust, of a settled and satisfied society. He is anxious to leave his own class and to enter another. He believes that the middle class possess what he does not possess. His natural honesty is too great to be satisfied with his mother's argument that the common people are better than the middle class because they possess more life. The middle class, Lawrence feels, possess ideas; or something else that he wishes himself to have. This is one cause of his unrest. And it is of profound importance. For the fact that he, like Paul, was a miner's son, and that he disliked his conditions, gave him a different approach to writing from those who have a settled station and enjoy circumstances which allow them to forget what those circumstances are.

Lawrence received a violent impetus from his birth. It set his gaze at an angle from which it took some of its most marked characteristics. He never looked back at the past, or at things as if they were curiosities of human psychology, nor was he interested in literature as literature. Everything has a use, a meaning, is not an end in itself. Comparing him again with Proust, one feels that he echoes nobody, continues no tradition, is unaware of the past, of the present save as it affects the future. As a writer, this lack of tradition affects him immensely. The thought plumps directly into his mind; up spurt the sentences as round, as hard, as direct as water thrown out in all directions by the impact of a stone. One feels that not a single word has been chosen for its beauty, or for its effect upon the architect of the sentence.

A Terribly Sensitive Mind¹

THE most distinguished writers of short stories in England are agreed, says Mr. Murry, that as a writer of short stories Katherine Mansfield was *hors concours*. No one has succeeded her, and no critic has been able to define her quality. But the reader of her journal is well content to let such questions be. It is not the quality of her writing or the degree of her fame that interest us in her diary, but the spectacle of a mind—a terribly sensitive mind—receiving one after another the haphazard impressions of eight years of life. Her diary was a mystical companion. 'Come my unseen, my unknown, let us talk together', she says on beginning a new volume. In it she noted facts—the weather, an engagement; she sketched scenes; she analysed her character; she described a pigeon or a dream or a conversation, nothing could be more fragmentary; nothing more private. We feel that we are watching a mind which is alone with itself; a mind which has so little thought of an audience that it will make use of a shorthand of its own now and then, or, as the mind in its loneliness tends to do, divide into two and talk to itself. Katherine Mansfield about Katherine Mansfield.

But then as the scraps accumulate we find ourselves giving them, or more probably receiving from Katherine Mansfield herself, a direction. From what point of view is she looking at life as she sits there, terribly sensitive, registering one after another such diverse impressions? She is a writer; a born writer. Everything she feels and hears and sees is not fragmentary and separate; it belongs together as writing. Sometimes the note is directly made for a story. 'Let me remember when I write about that fiddle how it runs up lightly and swings down sorrowful; how it *searches*', she notes. Or, '*Lumbago*. This is a very queer thing. So sudden, so painful, I must remember it when I write about an old man. The start to get up, the pause, the look of fury, and how, lying at night, one seems to get locked.' . . .

Again, the moment itself suddenly put on significance, and she traces the outline as if to preserve it. 'It's raining, but the air is

¹New York Herald Tribune, September 18th, 1927

soft, smoky, warm. Big drops patter on the languid leaves, the tobacco flowers lean over. Now there is a rustle in the ivy.

Wingly has appeared from the garden next door; he bounds from the wall. And delicately, lifting his paws, pointing his ears, very afraid the big wave will overtake him, he wades over the lake of green grass.' The Sister of Nazareth 'showing her pale gums and big discoloured teeth' asks for money. The thin dog. So thin that his body is like 'a cage on four wooden pegs', runs down the street. In some sense, she feels, the thin dog is the street. In all this we seem to be in the midst of unfinished stories; here is a beginning; here an end. They only need a loop of words thrown round them to be complete.

But then the diary is so private and so instinctive that it allows another self to break off from the self that writes and to stand a little apart watching it write. The writing self was a queer self; sometimes nothing would induce it to write. 'There is so much to do and I do so little. Life would be almost perfect here if only when I was *pretending* to work I always was working. Look at the stories that wait and wait just at the threshold. . . . *Next day*. Yet take this morning, for instance. I don't want to write anything. It's grey; it's heavy and dull. And short stories seem unreal and not worth doing. I don't want to write; I want to *live*. What does she mean by that? It's not easy to say. But *there* you are!'

What does she mean by that? No one felt more seriously the importance of writing than she did. In all the pages of her journal, instinctive, rapid as they are, her attitude toward her work is admirable, sane, caustic, and austere. There is no literary gossip; no vanity; no jealousy. Although during her last years she must have been aware of her success she makes no allusion to it. Her own comments upon her work are always penetrating and disparaging. Her stories wanted richness and depth; she was only 'skimming the top—no more'. But writing, the mere expression of things adequately and sensitively, is not enough. It is founded upon something unexpressed; and this something must be solid and entire. Under the desperate pressure of increasing illness she began a curious and difficult search, of which we catch glimpses only and those hard to interpret, after the crystal clearness which is needed if one is to write truthfully. 'Nothing of any worth can come of a disunited being', she wrote. One must have health in

one's self. After five years of struggle she gave up the search after physical health not in despair, but because she thought the malady was of the soul and that the cure lay not in any physical treatment, but in some such 'spiritual brotherhood' as that at Fontainebleau, in which the last months of her life were spent. But before she went she wrote the summing-up of her position with which the journal ends.

She wanted health, she wrote; but what did she mean by health? 'By health', she wrote, 'I mean the power to lead a full, adult, living, breathing life in close contact with what I love—the earth and the wonders thereof—the sea—the sun. . . . Then I want to *work*. At what? I want so to live that I work with my hands and my feeling and my brain. I want a garden, a small house, grass, animals, books, pictures, music. And out of this, the expression of this, I want to be writing. (Though I may write about cabmen. That's no matter.)' The diary ends with the words 'All is well'. And since she died three months later it is tempting to think that the words stood for some conclusion which illness and the intensity of her own nature drove her to find at an age when most of us are loitering easily among those appearances and impressions, those amusements and sensations, which none had loved better than she.

The Death of the Moth

MOTHS that fly by day are not properly to be called moths; they do not excite that pleasant sense of dark autumn nights and ivy-blossom which the commonest yellow underwing asleep in the shadow of the curtain never fails to rouse in us. They are hybrid creatures, neither gay like butterflies nor sombre like their own species. Nevertheless the present specimen, with his narrow hay-coloured wings, fringed with a tassel of the same colour, seemed to be content with life. It was a pleasant morning, mid-September, mild, benignant, yet with a keener breath than that of the summer months. The plough was already scoring the field opposite the window, and where the share had been, the earth was pressed flat and gleamed with moisture. Such vigour came rolling in from the fields and the down beyond that it was difficult to keep the eyes strictly turned upon the book. The rooks too were keeping one of their annual festivities; soaring round the tree-tops until it looked as if a vast net with thousands of black knots in it has been cast up into the air; which, after a few moments sank slowly down upon the trees until every twig seemed to have a knot at the end of it. Then, suddenly, the net would be thrown into the air again in a wider circle this time, with the utmost clamour and vociferation, as though to be thrown into the air and settle slowly down upon the tree-tops were a tremendously exciting experience.

The same energy which inspired the rooks, the ploughmen, the horses, and even, it seemed, the lean bare-backed downs, sent the moth fluttering from side to side of his square of the window-pane. One could not help watching him. One was, indeed, conscious of a queer feeling of pity for him. The possibilities of pleasure seemed that morning so enormous and so various that to have only a moth's part in life, and a day moth's at that, appeared a hard fate, and his zest in enjoying his meagre opportunities to the full, pathetic. He flew vigorously to one corner of his compartment, and, after waiting there a second, flew across to the other. What remained for him but to fly to a third corner and then to a fourth? That was all he could do, in spite of the size of the downs, the

width of the sky, the far-off smoke of houses, and the romantic voice, now and then, of a steamer out at sea. What he could do he did. Watching him, it seemed as if a fibre, very thin but pure, of the enormous energy of the world had been thrust into his frail and diminutive body. As often as he crossed the pane, I could fancy that a thread of vital light became visible. He was little or nothing but life.

Yet, because he was so small, and so simple a form of the energy that was rolling in at the open window and driving its way through so many narrow and intricate corridors in my own brain and in those of other human beings, there was something marvelous as well as pathetic about him. It was as if someone had taken a tiny bead of pure life and decking it as lightly as possible with down and feathers, had set it dancing and zigzagging to show us the true nature of life. Thus displayed one could not get over the strangeness of it. One is apt to forget all about life, seeing it humped and bossed and garnished and cumbered so that it has to move with the greatest circumspection and dignity. Again, the thought of all that life might have been had he been born in any other shape caused one to view his simple activities with a kind of pity.

After a time, tired by his dancing apparently, he settled on the window ledge in the sun, and the queer spectacle being at an end, I forgot about him. Then, looking up, my eye was caught by him. He was trying to resume his dancing, but seemed either so stiff or so awkward that he could only flutter to the bottom of the window-pane; and when he tried to fly across it he failed. Being intent on other matters I watched these futile attempts for a time without thinking, unconsciously waiting for him to resume his flight, as one waits for a machine, that has stopped momentarily, to start again without considering the reason for its failure. After perhaps a seventh attempt he slipped from the wooden ledge and fell, fluttering his wings, on to his back on the window-sill. The helplessness of his attitude roused me. It flashed upon me that he was in difficulties; he could no longer raise himself; his legs struggled vainly. But, as I stretched out a pencil, meaning to help him to right himself, it came over me that the failure and awkwardness were the approach of death. I laid the pencil down again.

THE DEATH OF THE MOTH

The legs agitated themselves once more. I looked as if for the enemy against which he struggled. I looked out of doors. What had happened there? Presumably it was midday, and work in the fields had stopped. Stillness and quiet had replaced the previous animation. The birds had taken themselves off to feed in the brooks. The horses stood still. Yet the power was there all the same, massed outside indifferent, impersonal, not attending to anything in particular. Somehow it was opposed to the little hay-coloured moth. It was useless to try to do anything. One could only watch the extraordinary efforts made by those tiny legs against an on-coming doom which could, had it chosen, have subnerged an entire city, not merely a city, but masses of human beings; nothing, I knew, had any chance against death. Nevertheless after a pause of exhaustion the legs fluttered again. It was superb this last protest, and so frantic that he succeeded at last in righting himself. One's sympathies, of course, were all on the side of life. Also, when there was nobody to care or to know, this gigantic effort on the part of an insignificant little moth, against a power of such magnitude, to retain what no one else valued or desired to keep, moved one strangely. Again, somehow, one saw life, a pure bead. I lifted the pencil again, useless though I knew it to be. But even as I did so, the unmistakable tokens of death showed themselves. The body relaxed, and instantly grew stiff. The struggle was over. The insignificant little creature now knew death. As I looked at the dead moth, this minute wayside triumph of so great a force over so mean an antagonist filled me with wonder. Just as life had been strange a few minutes before, so death was now as strange. The moth having righted himself now lay most decently and uncomplainingly composed. O yes, he seemed to say, death is stronger than I am.